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Issue 181

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MAMORU HOSODA ON HIS LATEST FILM

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GET READY FOR THE FRIGHT OF
YOUR LIFE AS NEO ROUNDS UP THE
VERY BEST IN HALLOWEEN SCARES!



WHEN THEY CRY
HIGURASHI NO NAKU KORONI

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WELCOME

WELCOME TO issue 181 of NEO! It's my favourite time of the year, and Halloween is almost upon us, so we put together a bumper feature over on page 038 all about some of our favourite scary tales from the world of Asian entertainment. Even though we dedicated eight pages to it and covered

over 90 titles, there's plenty more we couldn't include and if we missed out your favourites, let us know on social media so we can share them with everyone else! From gut-wrenching body horror titles that are so gory and realistic that they got reported to the FBI, to zombie end of the world scenarios, and even the notorious *P.T.*, we crammed in everything from classic Japanese ghost stories to vampire movies. If you don't find something in there that gets your pulse racing, you might just be undead already...

Our man in Japan, Mark Guthrie, shares some Halloween costume ideas taken directly from Japanese culture over on page 032. Discover some creepy figures from ghost stories, and find out why Japanese kids are probably terrified of visiting the toilets by themselves...

Perfectly on theme, our flipper cover this issue features *Fist of the North Star: Lost Paradise*, SEGA's Yakuza-style visit to the ultra-violent world of Kenshiro, the heir to the deadly Hokuto Shinken martial arts technique that is so powerful it can explode your opponent's head. We spoke to producer Daisuke Sato and Jun Orihara about bringing that world to life – find out how they did it by flipping this issue over!

Until next time – sleep tight, and don't forget to leave your night lights on this Halloween...

GEMMA COX, EDITOR

MEET THE TEAM

ALEX JONES



"It's Halloween, so as well as some obligatory horror anime I've been checking out some of the best spooky games the Nintendo Switch has to offer. *Undertale* is always a winner, and I've really been enjoying *Hollow Knight* too!"

TOM SMITH



"Ain't no party like a *Mario Party*! I can't get enough of it! It brings back so many fond memories of battling friends on the original Nintendo 64 version. Nintendo, please never change."

LAURENCE GREEN



"I indulged in a good old binge-watch and got up to date with season three of *Attack on Titan* – even now, the show still goes all in on shock-factor. That's my Halloween outfit sorted too, come to think of it..."

JONATHAN CLEMENTS



"Amid preparations for this month's Scotland Loves Anime, I've been working on a book with Andrew Osmond about Isao Takahata's notorious box-office flop *Little Norse Prince*, since widely recognised as a masterpiece."

DAVID WEST



"This has been a month for quiet reflection on the delicate, ephemeral beauty and subtle, understated compassion of that sublime example of visual poetry known as *Fist Of The North Star*. That and exploding heads, obviously."

ANDREW OSMOND



"I'll be in Shibuya, Tokyo on Halloween. I'm writing before the big night, but based on past years, it'll be a berserk experience where you can easily be squeezed to death between zombies, Titans, and Marios..."

MITCHELL LINEHAM



"I've been playing plenty of *Dragon Ball FighterZ* and *Xenoblade Chronicles 2*, and I plan to watch a bunch of Halloween movies. *The Nightmare Before Christmas*, *Hocus Pocus* and *Sleepy Hollow*, anyone?"

MICHAEL DODSON



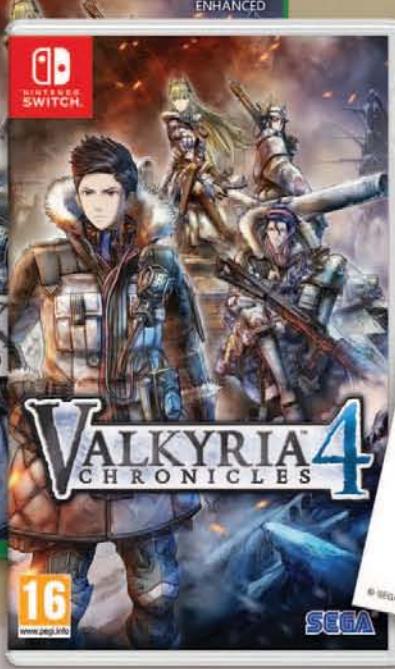
"It's shaping up to be a great end of the year for Nintendo fans – not only do we have the *Xenoblade* DLC and *Super Mario Party* to keep us busy now, but in only a few months, we'll be getting *Super Smash Bros Ultimate* – fantastic!"



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THE FAMILY MAN

Mamoru Hosoda talks to NEO's David West about making a film based on his own family, why only a teenage girl could play a four-year-old boy, and fighting for space for original ideas with *Mirai*.

FROM *THE GIRL Who Leapt Through Time* in 2006, through *Summer Wars*, *Wolf Children* and 2015's *The Boy And The Beast*, Mamoru Hosoda has established himself as one of anime's most astute observers of the ties that bind people and families together. His latest film, *Mirai*, was inspired by his own experiences as a parent and tells the story of four-year-old Kun who reacts to the birth of his baby sister Mirai with resentment and jealousy. Then Kun receives a series of unexpected visitors, including the family's pet dog in the form of a human prince, his long-since departed great-grandfather, and most importantly Mirai as her future teenage self, determined to convince her angry kid brother that she's going to be worth accepting in the long run.

Hosoda's films fall into two broad categories. *Summer Wars* and *The Boy And The Beast* are big on action and spectacle, while *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time*, *Wolf Children*, and *Mirai* are much more intimate, subdued affairs.

"It's not actually conceptual, it's more like a mood swing," says Hosoda. "It takes three years to make one movie. Imagine if you're working on a love story for three years, at the end of it you think, 'Gah, I don't want to do this anymore! I just want to punch someone!' So you want to make an action film. And then when

you make an action film for three years, you're like, 'Yeah, that's exhausting. Let's do something calmer.' Basically, I want to do something different from what I've just done."

The Girl Who Leapt Through Time and *Summer Wars* had screenplays by writer Satoko Okudera. For *Wolf Children*, Hosoda wrote the story and Okudera contributed to the screenplay, but since then Hosoda has written his scripts alone. "*Wolf Children* was based on my own experiences," says Hosoda when asked about why he now writes solo. "It's about my mother and how she brought me up, so I actually did speak to Satoko before we started, but the problem was it was kind of awkward to ask somebody else to write about my mother. Satoko had never met my mum, so I thought it might be easier if I did it myself. Anything that is based on my own experience I'd rather do myself, but if I make something based on somebody else's life, or something that's nothing to do with me, I'm happy to work with an outside scriptwriter."

CLOSE TO HOME

Of all Hosoda's films, *Mirai* feels the most personal. When asked who he used as inspiration for the character designs, Hosoda >>>





1. It's always a strange day when your dog turns into a human to tell you off. 2. Hosoda's film truly captures the multifaceted joys of parenthood. 3. At least Kun is quiet when he's eating. 4. Kun searches for the last shred of his dignity. 5. Kun will snatch anything not nailed down, including his dog's tail.

FIGHTING FOR SPACE

Released in Japan on 20 July, *Mirai* was kept off the top spot at the domestic box office by *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom*, another example of the dominance of the blockbuster franchises. However, June saw Hirokazu Kore'eda's *Shoplifters* take the top spot, scoring a win for original storytelling about families.

>>> brings up a photo on his phone of his own family. Sure enough, there's Kun, little baby Mirai, their mom, grandparents, and even the pet dog. "I actually took my kids to the studio so that Hiroyuki Aoyama the animator could meet my children," says Hosoda. "That's how we built the characters."

Mirai doesn't offer a sugar-coated view of childhood. Kun, deeply aggrieved to find himself deprived of his parents' undivided attention, throws a series of spectacular tantrums. So is Hosoda worried about how his son will react when he grows up and sees his younger self acting like such a brat on the screen? "I'm fully aware of that!" says the filmmaker, laughing. "I know this is going to happen and I'm pretty sure when he turns into a teenager he will be embarrassed or maybe a little bit unhappy, but hey, that's life. I'm a film director, this is my movie, so live with it. But I think this project will only be completed when he becomes a dad himself. I want him to watch the film again and hopefully he will understand why I made the film and why I did it the way that I did, so I'm sort of looking forward to that."

The family in the movie lives in a multi-level house with

a garden in the middle of the building that is open to the sky, although Hosoda points out that the unusual design is not inspired by his own home. "This film is very personal and based on my own family, so people do think everything in the film is true," he says. "I get my neighbours asking me, when are you going to move to that lovely house? I'm not! It's conceptual, it's an environment for this child and his adventure, and it's his entire world because your home is your entire world when you're four years old. Also because the house has different levels, these symbolise his growing up and learning something."

In the story, after baby Mirai is born, the mother of the family goes back to work, while the father stays home, juggling looking after Kun and his sister with his career as an architect. The portrayal of the father as the stay-at-home parent is an unusual one in Japan where the expectation is for the mother to raise children while her salaryman spouse earns their keep. "Actually, this question came up quite a lot in Cannes," says Hosoda, referring to *Mirai*'s premiere at the prestigious film festival. "Obviously, Japan is a lot more backwards than here in Europe





"IMAGINE IF YOU'RE WORKING ON A LOVE STORY FOR THREE YEARS, AT THE END OF IT YOU THINK, 'GAH, I DON'T WANT TO DO THIS ANYMORE! I JUST WANT TO PUNCH SOMEONE!' SO YOU WANT TO MAKE AN ACTION FILM."

or America and that's why there's this role reversal in the film. Yes, it is true that we are more conservative as a society but say six years ago when I made *Wolf Children* it was really rare to see a dad with a child in his arms. You see a lot of them now, so in six years there was this huge change in society and how people work is shifting too. More people are working from home, I personally know quite a few animation directors who use their dining room table for their work space and who look after their kids. I'm not really making a huge statement here but this is where we want to be in the near future and I'm sure things are changing."

THE RIGHT GIRL FOR THE JOB

While Kun was modelled on Hosoda's son, his voice was provided by Moka Kamishiraishi, an actress in her late teens, and finding the right voice for Kun was one of the toughest challenges for the director.

"It was very difficult, it really was," he says. "Making a movie with a four-year-old boy as the lead character, you just can't do that with live action, animation is so much better for that."

"We auditioned loads of kids who are voice actors. We did audition younger actors, but they didn't work, so we got six-year-old, seven-year-old, eight-year-old, nine-year-old child actors who can actually act but the problem was, if they're six, they sound like they're six years old. If they're seven, they sound

seven, so it didn't work. We were practically stuck and then Moka came in to audition for Mirai, so I thought, well, can you try Kun instead? And it worked. It's not that she sounded like a young boy or anything like that, but she seemed to understand his struggle and emotions, so I think it's not just the quality of the voice but it's more like an understanding of the character. She was perfect for that."

In the movie, little Kun's favourite toys are his trains, and one of the fantasy sequences sees Kun and future Mirai confronted by a frightening, black bullet train. Playing with his trains gives Kun a feeling of control, where the arrival of his attention-stealing little sister has robbed him of the sense of security that he had with his parents.

"My son loved trains even before he started speaking," says Hosoda. "He just loved trains more than anything in the world and I was fascinated by that. There's the black bullet train in the film, it's a train but Kun can't control it. The nightmare for any kid is about trust, I think, whether or not you can trust the environment that you're in, and if you can, that will give a child some sort of security."

SOMEWHERE TO BELONG

Ever since *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time*, the common theme running through Hosoda's work has been the need to >>>

BIG NAMES

Prior to *The Girl Who Leapt Through Time*, Hosoda worked on two of anime's biggest franchises. He co-directed *Digimon: The Movie* with Shigeyasu Yamuchi and directed the sixth *One Piece* feature film *Baron Omatsuri And The Secret Island*. When still an animator he worked on *Dragon Ball* and *Sailor Moon*.



"I THINK MY FILMS ARE UNUSUAL BECAUSE ANIMATION HAS HARDLY EVER DEALT WITH THE FAMILY AS A MOTIF, BECAUSE KIDS AND TEENAGERS WANT TO BE FREE FROM THEIR FAMILIES, SO ANIMATION DOESN'T REALLY DEAL WITH THE FAMILIES THAT THEY WANT TO GET AWAY FROM."

WORLD'S FIRST

Mirai has the distinction of being the first Japanese anime movie to have its world premiere at the famous Cannes Film Festival in May of this year. The name *Mirai* means future in Japanese and the movie's Japanese title, *Mirai no Mirai*, translates to English as *Mirai Of The Future*.

>>> belong. *Mirai* takes a slightly different approach in that Kun has his family, but he's fighting against letting anyone else into his little circle.

"I think it's a fairly new approach to an old theme and a recurring theme for me," says Hosoda. "In two of my movies, *The Boy And The Beast* and *Wolf Children*, I dealt with outcasts, kids who don't really fit in with society. I think I wanted to concentrate on issues that could take place in a normal family environment this time. In a way with those earlier movies, it's so easy and obvious, the theme of the outcast, that way the issue is obvious. The characters are different from the social norm, maybe because they have a single mum, but I thought

normal families have their own issues too that might not be that different. I think my understanding of what I was thinking about family and how I make my movies is slightly different for this film but not that different. The issues are the same but I'm dealing with them in a more subtle way."

Japanese cinema has a tradition of filmmakers who chronicle the lives of families, from the great master Yasujiro Ozu, followed by Yoji Yamada, and Ozu's modern-day heir Hirokazu Kore'eda. It could be argued that Hosoda is anime's answer to those celebrated directors. "Anime's answer is an interesting way to say it," he replies, "but I think my films are unusual because animation has hardly ever dealt with the





family as a motif, because kids and teenagers want to be free from their families, so animation doesn't really deal with the families that they want to get away from. I'm aware that I'm unusual as an animation director but having said that I think animation is just one method, one technique for filmmaking. *Mirai* belongs in this context from Ozu to Kore'eda. It's a film, I just happen to use animation as my means. I think this is a natural shift for animation. We're not a genre. This is a movie dealing with a family that happens to use animation. I'm part of this group of filmmakers making movies about families, not only in Japan but all over the world, but I'm aware that I'm different from other animation directors."

Another factor that distinguishes Hosoda from many of his contemporaries is his ability to bring original stories to the screen, which is quite an accomplishment given how much the Japanese box office is dominated by big franchises, from *Bleach* and *Dragon Ball* to *One Piece*.

"I was involved in a *One Piece* feature film but the problem with working on something like *One Piece* is that a feature film is just one part of it," says Hosoda. "There's a manga, a TV

series, now they've got this *One Piece* Kabuki version believe it or not, there's all the business with posters and action figures, so it's huge. A feature film is just a small part of a huge commercial project, where our movies are just one thing, but they're also everything. This film, it's art, it's a product, but not a part of anything else at all. It's really hard to compete because obviously they're a bigger business."

"Not to disrespect anyone but I think what we make is much more powerful and can influence people in a fundamental way emotionally. I think we really need to fight for our artistic freedom and at the same time we've got to compete against the big franchise films. It's hard but it's worth doing," he adds.

"Having said that, I was involved with *One Piece* and I had a really great experience, so I think we need to be nice to each other. If, at the end of the day, the whole Japanese film industry can grow then I've got no problem with anything or anyone."

Join the family when *Mirai* opens in cinemas on 2 November from Anime Ltd. ●

6. Your parenting has definitely gone awry when your toddler joins a motorcycle gang. **7.** Mirai has come all the way from the future just to tell her brother to stop being a brat. **8.** Cleaning the aquarium was proving more difficult than Mirai had ever imagined. **9.** Kun just realised his life is being turned into a movie before his very eyes! **10.** Kun tries to hide from the embarrassment his tantrums will cause his grown-up self. **11.** A girl from the future and no one asks her what new Pokémons are coming out next?





What's your strongest contender for franchise of the year?

NEO AWARDS 2018

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WHEN THE END of the year rolls around, it can only mean one thing – the NEO Awards! Every year we celebrate the best of Asian entertainment in the UK, and this year is no different. We invite you, the readers, to have your say on the best titles to be released in the last 12 months, and to let us know which companies have gone above and beyond for you. From game companies to musical acts, we like to celebrate talent, dedication, and hard work, and the NEO Awards are your opportunity to join in with us!

This year, the NEO Awards sponsors are SEGA, so we got in touch with Melaine Brou, Product Marketing Manager of SEGA Europe, about the awards. "SEGA is really happy and proud to sponsor this year's annual reader awards and celebrate the best of Asian pop culture with these amazing titles and companies. We can't wait to see what NEO readers will vote as their favourites for this year."



Cast your vote for best musical act!

Uncooked Media's Group Commercial Manager, Rob Cox, had this to say: "With their truly iconic brands and top notch Japanese games we are delighted SEGA are sponsoring the always hotly anticipated NEO Reader Awards. 2018 has been a stellar year for the Asian entertainment community with so much quality for the readers to choose from. We expect some very close outcomes – exciting times!"

Voting couldn't be simpler, with an online voting form posted on our social media accounts and website. Find them at twitter.com/neo_magazine, facebook.com/neomagazineuk and neomag.co.uk, respectively. You can vote until 3 December in our categories, which include best anime, best anime movie, best specialist company, and many others. Simply select one favourite for each from the list provided, and leave the calculating to us! The results will be published in NEO 184, which is on sale 17 January. ●



With so many amazing titles this year, readers will be spoilt for choice!



MCM COMIC CON LONDON

Returning 26–28 October

One of the biggest celebrations of pop culture in the UK returns this October to Excel London, with even bigger and better attractions, plus a host of your favourite companies. This autumn, the anime guest of honour is Hibiki Yoshizaki, director of the short film *Me!Me!Me!*. You can see an exhibition of this work and even pick up merchandise too! Other special guests include Dave Bautista (WWE, *Guardians of the Galaxy*), Paul Bettany (*Avengers Infinity War*, *Solo: A Star Wars Story*), plus Katherine McNamara, Emeraude Toubia, Alberto Rosende, Jade Hassouné, and Chai Hansen from *Shadowhunters*, as well as a host of comic artists and creators including Frank Miller, Brian Azzarello, Amanda Conner and more!

If you'd like a more permanent reminder of your visit, you can even get tattooed by Ink Fusion Empire – artists will be on hand to help you get your dream piece. Visit MCM's website for a full list and to book yourself in with individual artists.

And that's not all – Nintendo, Bandai Namco, Rice Digital, Esdevium Games, Magic Madhouse and more of your favourite gaming companies will be in attendance, as will the PopAsia area, Comic Village, panels, and special cosplay events. Make sure you head to mcmcomiccon.com/london for more information, and to buy tickets.

Although NEO will not be attending, you can still grab a bargain subscription with a free gift this issue by heading to our subscriptions page on 086. And don't forget that we offer three issues for £8.99 when you subscribe using Direct Debit, too!



K-MUSIC FESTIVAL

Now until 20 November

Londoners will be treated to a celebration of Korean music this autumn as K-Music presents six amazing Korean acts, including SsingSing, E-DO, Urban Sound, Ahn Sook-Sun, Near East Quartet, and Youn Sun Nah. The acts will be performing at the Southbank Centre, Pizza Express Jazz Club, Rich Mix and Kings Place. For more information, head to k-music.co.uk.

The main image is the cover art for Devil May Cry 5. It features Dante, the lead character, in the foreground, holding his signature sword, Vergil. They are standing in a city street that has been transformed into a hellish, demon-infested environment. In the background, Nero, another protagonist, is seen from behind, also holding a sword. The city buildings are skeletal and skeletal figures are scattered throughout the scene. The title 'Devil May Cry 5' is prominently displayed in the lower center, with 'Devil May Cry' in a silver, gothic font and '5' in a large, red, jagged font. The overall atmosphere is dark, gritty, and action-oriented.

//COMING UP DEVIL MAY CRY 5

OUT: 08 MARCH // DISTRIBUTOR: CAPCOM

The devilish duo of Dante and Nero return to save the world in March when *Devil May Cry 5* comes to the PS4, PC and Xbox One. With Red Grave City overrun by demons, players must fight their way to the blood-sucking tree Qlipoth at its centre and get to the root of the problem (see what we did there?). The developers promise more insane action than ever before, including a motorcycle that splits into a pair of huge blades.

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NEO'S TOP TEN

Our roundup of the hottest tracks currently blasting on the office stereo

1 PASSCODE – TAKING YOU OUT OUT NOW!

Ex Libris PassCode has just landed in the UK, the ear-splitting debut overseas album from Japanese hybrid idol quartet PassCode. Lazier music fans may try to liken the group to BABYMETAL, and we can see where they're coming from; PassCode at its core is a hard rock group with four idols at the front with a fantastic band providing trashy guitars, nippy keyboards and aggressive drumbeats at breakneck speeds behind them. That's where the comparison ends; there are no fox gods here, no back story, just track after track of party rock anthems infused with elements of trance, 8-bit chiptune and J-pop. They have a song called *Club Kids Never Die* after all.

This overseas album is a compilation of PassCode's indie and major material, hand-picked by JPU Records, and features one track completely re-recorded and mastered exclusively for this release. *Ex Libris PassCode* on CD also features a 20-page booklet, new member photos, artwork and all lyrics translated into English and includes transliterations so fans can sing along too. The release is out now and available to buy in your local HMV and other stores across the UK, and is also available on iTunes, Amazon and Spotify.

Taking You Out is PassCode's latest single and one of their video game tie-ins. The song's music video features footage from mobile racer *Asphalt 9: Legends*, and if you stick around until the end you can see them playing the game too.

NEW SINGLE! NEW ALBUM!



UK SPECIAL ALBUM!



2 MUTANT MONSTER – HANASHITEAGERU 12-21 NOVEMBER

Punk sisters MUTANT MONSTER have chopped off their long hair and donated the lot to charity while making their brand new music video *Hanashiteageru* (meaning "I'll Let You Go"). The track is taken from their upcoming overseas exclusive album *NEKOKABURI*, meaning "a lion in cat's clothing", and sees the members striking their favourite neko poses on the cover.

"It took us two years to get our hair to the right length for donating," states drummer CHAD. "It takes around 20-people to donate their hair and create one wig. So we feel this is an important opportunity to raise awareness."

The new album is due for release the first week of November in the UK and features entirely new artwork and title for outside of Japan, and boasts ten new songs, including two never-before released tracks available exclusively on this edition.

MUTANT MONSTER will bring their high-energy punk spirit to the cities of Ramsgate, Hull, Huddersfield, Brighton, Manchester, Birmingham and London between 12-21 November. Tickets are on sale now for around £10.

NEW ALBUM! UK DATE!



3 LOVEBITES – CLOCKWORK IMMORTALITY 21 NOVEMBER

Heavy metal heroines LOVEBITES have had one amazing year, from rising to win Best New Band in the Metal Hammer Awards in London, to playing main stage at top UK metal festival Bloodstock and releasing their ace EP *Battle Against Damnation* in June.

Now they're not only back in the UK with another headline date in London planned, but they've also revealed details of their next album.

So far all that's been revealed for the upcoming album is its title *Clockwork Immortality*, its kick arse artwork featuring their usual wolf imagery (and this time accompanied by clock cogs!), and that the album will feature ten newly recorded tracks and that there will be two Japanese limited editions, one with a Blu-ray and the other with a DVD of live material. Expect news on the UK edition to drop shortly.

LOVEBITES are scheduled to headline the O2 Academy Islington in London on 21 November as part of their first European headline tour. Tickets are on sale now for £17.40.

NEW ALBUM! UK TOUR!



4 CROSSFAITH – THE PERFECT NIGHTMARE 13-21 OCTOBER

Crossfaith are back in the UK as part of their European tour for upcoming album *EX_MACHINA*. The boys are confirmed for Bristol, Glasgow, Nottingham, London, Sheffield and Dublin from 13 October. Tickets are on sale now for around £15. New single *The Perfect Nightmare* may just be the heaviest track the band's recorded to date. You can listen now from all the usual streaming sources, as well as on YouTube. A number of merchandise options and album formats are available from the band's international website. Set your browsers to crossfaith.jp/overseas.

5 LITE – GHOST DANCE 14 OCTOBER

LITE will be heading to London to headline day one of Enjoy Sugoi, a two-part festival series that aims to "showcase two of the best experimental rock acts from Japan, with amazing support acts". The other band heading up part two will be tricot.

LITE are a Japanese instrumental rock band that deliver soaring, emotional and thrilling compositions with progressive, edgy riffs and complex rhythms. Meanwhile tricot have been UK tour support for The Pixies and bring an unusual and distinctive mixture of pop harmonies and math-rock. LITE will headline The Garage in Highbury on 14 October. Tickets are on sale now for £25.

6 SPYAIR – IMAGINATION 21 NOVEMBER

Anime theme supremes SPYAIR are about to embark on their first European tour this November, with a date scheduled at The Underworld in London on 21 November. Their buddies ROOKiEZ is PUNK'D will be joining them on tour, who are also no strangers to anime! The latter have had their songs featured in *Bleach*, *Blue Exorcist* and *Durarara!!* amongst others. SPYAIR, who also have their music in *Bleach*, are probably best known for their work in *Gintama*.

Tickets for the London gig are on sale now for £26.25.

NEW ALBUM! UK DATE!



LONDON SHOW!



9 LADYBABY – BITE ME OUT NOW!

Viral J-pop stars LADYBABY have taken many forms in recent months. Having ditched their screaming Aussie-in-a-tutu LADYBEARD, and later Rei leaving too, the group recently reappeared as a four-member unit featuring founding member Rie and three new girls.

Bite me is taken off of their first single with the new line-up and is available digitally now.

NEW VIDEO!



7 SAY SUE ME – B LOVER NOW – 13 NOVEMBER

Korean surf rockers Say Sue Me have been going from strength to strength since joining label Damnably. At the time of writing they've just begun their biggest ever European tour, including a whopping 27 dates, with over half taking place in the UK. To celebrate the band has released the music video to latest song *B Lover*, and it's explosive to say the least. Sophomore record *Where We Were Together* is out now, with this tour imaginatively titled *The Where We Were Together*. Tickets are on sale now starting from £7.

LONDON DATE!



10 HOTEI – BATTLE WITHOUT HONOR OR HUMANITY 20 OCTOBER

Kill Bill theme legend Tomoyasu Hotei will be back, performing in London on 20 October at the mighty Shepherd's Bush Empire. We were in the VIP area of one of his London shows a while ago and spotted loads of famous Brit rockers, including the whole of Madness nodding their heads as Japan's guitar samurai let shred. Tickets are on sale now for £31.95.

8 DIR EN GREY – RANUCULUS 16 OCTOBER

Dir en grey, one of visual kei's scariest and notorious bands, is back in the UK following the release of latest album *The Insulated World*, out now from Okami Records. *Ranuculus* is the latest music video to be released from the record and is available to watch now on YouTube.

The band descend on The Electric Ballroom in Camden, London on 16 October. Tickets are priced at £30 plus fees.

OUT OF TUNE?

JONATHAN CLEMENTS SINGS THE SAME OLD SONG

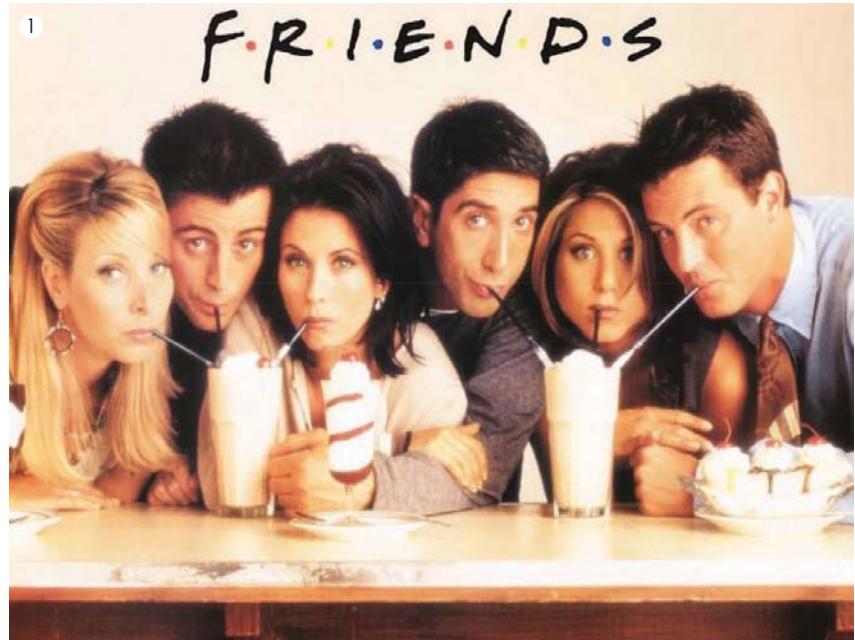
Music producer Akihiro Tomita has fired a warning shot at anime financers with a comment about the decline of the anime theme song. Speaking at an event in Shinjuku on 9 September, Tomita observed that Netflix's habit of chopping off the credits was a binge-watcher's dream, but diminished the relevance of the traditional 90-second opening and ending songs.

Their purpose has been a matter of debate for generations. They used to be handy announcements that your show was starting, reinforcing the ritual of appointment television. But producers fretted that a long theme song might lure trigger-happy channel-hoppers to see what was on the other side. This was particularly an issue in the 1990s American market, where viewers might sit through the theme song to, say, *Friends*, only to have to then endure another commercial break before the show began. *Will & Grace* saw its theme tune squashed and occasionally reduced to nothing but a musical sting if the action overran in an episode. *Frasier*'s opening was just a few bars on a vibraphone – lasting just seven seconds. Anime themes, however, have remained notably long, turning into a veritable juke box of tie-ins and product placement.

Tomita's comments quietly assert the bargaining power that Netflix is enjoying behind the scenes. The online behemoth's ability to call the shots threatens the delicate balance of many an anime production committee, most of which feature a record company among investors. So they'll chip in 10% of the budget, but they want their new pop idol singing the theme song. And the animators don't mind, because 90 seconds off the top and tail of every episode means they only have to make those bits once, giving them a week off every season.

Since record companies are still substantial players in the Japanese market, they are liable to want their airtime some other way. *Godzilla: Planet of Monsters*, for example, on which Tomita was musical director, was made by Polygon Pictures, which is part-owned by King Records. If theme songs phase out, get ready for excuses for musical interludes elsewhere within anime shows, possibly even anime musicals that make watching the songs part of the action, and animators complaining that they have to work even harder to fill up the time. But I, for one, hope the old style of theme tune stays, because I still like that ritual quality. I might even sing along, occasionally with my own made-up lyrics. You should hear me do *Evangelion*. "Lots of robots / And people in misery / There's a penguin but please don't ask me what for..." [That's enough – Ed.] ●

"TOMITA'S COMMENTS QUIETLY ASSERT THE BARGAINING POWER THAT NETFLIX IS ENJOYING BEHIND THE SCENES. THE ONLINE BEHEMOTH'S ABILITY TO CALL THE SHOTS THREATENS THE DELICATE BALANCE OF MANY AN ANIME PRODUCTION COMMITTEE, MOST OF WHICH FEATURE A RECORD COMPANY AMONG INVESTORS."



1. *Friends* just wouldn't be the same if you didn't spend a minute and a half crooning "I'll be there for youoo!" before it started. 2. *Godzilla: Planet of Monsters*, on which Akihiro Tomita was musical director. 3. *Will & Grace*: tragedy as their theme tune is squashed by the action involved in the life and loves of two gay guys, an average gal, and her rich friend.



BATTLE GIRL HIGH SCHOOL

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complicated!

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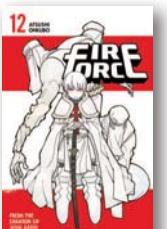
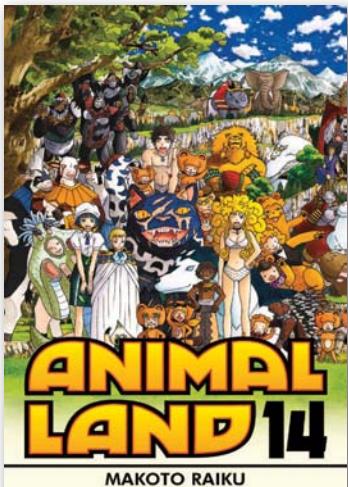
mvm-films.com  MVM_UK  MVMEntertainment

UK release schedule



ANIME

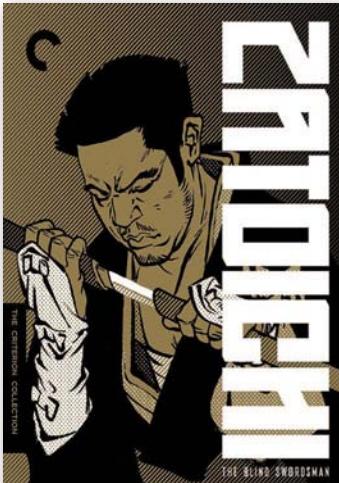
DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
22/10	One Piece [Uncut] Collection 19 [DVD]	Manga
22/10	Pokémon Movie 17-19 Collection XY [DVD]	Manga
29/10	Asterisk War Part 2 [DVD, Blu-ray]	MVM
29/10	Digimon Frontier [DVD]	Manga
29/10	Dragon Ball Z Complete Movie Collection [DVD, Blu-ray]	Manga
29/10	Yu-Gi-Oh! seasons 1-5 [DVD]	Manga
29/10	Digimon: Digital Monsters Season 1-4 [DVD]	Manga
29/10	5 Centimeters Per Second [Blu-ray]	Manga
29/10	Junjo Romantica Season 1 [Blu-ray]	Anime Limited
29/10	K: Return of Kings [Collector's Blu-ray, Blu-ray]	Anime Limited
29/10	Lucky Star	Anime Limited
29/10	March Comes in Like a Lion 1:1 [Collector's Blu-ray]	Anime Limited
29/10	Testament of Sister New Devil BURST [Collector's Blu-ray, DVD]	Anime Limited
29/10	Tokyo Ghoul Seasons 1, 2 + OVA [Blu-ray]	Anime Limited
05/11	Grimoire of Zero [Combi Collector's]	MVM
05/11	Love & Lies Collection [Blu-ray]	MVM
12/11	Granblue Fantasy Part 1 [Blu-ray]	MVM
12/11	Dragon Ball Kai: The Final Chapters Part 2 [DVD, Blu-ray]	Manga
12/11	Gundam: Reconguista in G [Blu-ray]	Anime Limited
19/11	When They Cry Series 1-3 [Collector's Blu-ray]	MVM
19/11	No Game No Life: Zero [Collector's Blu-ray, DVD]	MVM
19/11	Naruto Shippuden Box 34 [DVD]	Manga
19/11	Junjo Romantica Season 2 [Blu-ray]	Anime Limited



MANGA

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
18/10	Cells at Work! 6	Kodansha
18/10	Attack On Titan Season 3 Manga Box Set	Kodansha

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
18/10	Fire Force 12	Kodansha
18/10	Bleach 3-in-1 Edition 24	Shonen Jump
18/10	Bleach Box Set Vol 3 [vols 49-74]	Shonen Jump
18/10	Blue Exorcist 20	VM Shonen Jump Advanced
18/10	Food Wars 26	VM Shonen Jump Advanced
18/10	Frankenstein: Junji Ito Story Collection	VIZ Media
18/10	Haikyu!! 28	Shonen Jump
18/10	Juni Taisen: Zodiac War 1	Shonen Jump
18/10	Kuroko's Basketball 2-in-1 Edition 14	Shonen Jump
18/10	Magi 32	Viz Media
18/10	My Hero Academia 15	Shonen Jump
18/10	My Hero Academia Vigilantes 02	Shonen Jump
18/10	Naruto 3-in-1 Edition 24	Shonen Jump
18/10	Rurouni Kenshin 3-in-1 Edition 8 [vols 22, 23, 24]	Shonen Jump
18/10	The Promised Neverland 6	Shonen Jump
18/10	Tokyo Ghoul Complete Box Set [vols 1-13]	VIZ Media
25/10	Real Account 9-11	Kodansha
25/10	Aho-Girl: A Clueless Girl 9	Kodansha
30/10	Animal Land 14	Kodansha
30/10	Happiness 8	Kodansha
30/10	Onimonogatari	Vertical
01/11	Ao Haru Ride Vol 1	Shojo Beat
01/11	Case Closed 68	VM Shonen Jump Advanced
01/11	Coyote	Sublime
01/11	Dead Dead Demon's Dededede Destruction 3	VIZ Media
01/11	Fire Punch 4	VIZ Media
01/11	Homestuck 3	VIZ Media
01/11	Natsume's Book of Friends 22	Shojo Beat
01/11	NieR: Automata: Long Story Short	Fiction
01/11	Sleepy Princess in the Demon Castle 3	VIZ Media
01/11	The Water Dragon's Bride 7	Shojo Beat
01/11	The World's Greatest First Love 11	Sublime
01/11	Yona of the Dawn 14	Shojo Beat



ASIAN FILM

DATE	TITLE	DISTRIBUTOR
24/09	City Hunter	Eureka
24/09	A Prayer Before Dawn	Altitude Film Entertainment
24/09	Ciao Ciao	Matchbox Films
01/10	Blind Fury	Mediumrare
29/10	Jackie Chan's Project A & Project A Part 2	Eureka
29/10	Operation Red Sea	Cine Asia
09/11	Of Love & Law	Hakawati
19/11	Zatoichi The Blind Swordsman Criterion Collection	Sony Pictures
23/11	Shoplifters	Thunderbird Releasing
26/11	Once Upon A Time In China Trilogy	Eureka
26/12	Alita: Battle Angel	20th Century Fox
01/01	Spider Lillies	Parasol Pictures
01/02	Burning	Thunderbird Releasing



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WORDS BY DAVID WEST



THE BLIND SWORDSMAN STRIKES!

The classic chanbara series in one huge collection!

WHILE MOST VIEWERS in the west know the character of Zatoichi from Takeshi Kitano's 2003 film, it was actor Shintaro Katsu who first immortalised the figure of the blind swordsman for Japanese audiences. Katsu played the humble, wandering masseur who happens to be incredibly lethal with his cane sword in a run of 25 movies from 1962 to 1973. That was followed by a TV series before Katsu returned to the big screen for a final outing in 1989. The series was so popular that it included crossover appearances from a pair of legendary cinematic swordsmen.

Toshiro Mifune plays the famous wandering ronin from Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* and *Sanjuro* (well, it's actually a bit more complicated than that) in 1970's *Zatoichi Meets Yojimbo*. Then in 1971, Hong Kong star Jimmy Wang Yu tangled with the blind swordsman in *Zatoichi Meets The One-Armed Swordsman*. 1972's *Zatoichi In Desperation* provided the basis for Phillip Noyce's excellent *Blind Fury*, starring Rutger Hauer as a blind swordsman fighting gangsters in modern day America.

Few films in the original series have ever been released in the UK – there were a handful available on DVD from the now defunct Artsmagic / Warrior label in the early 2000s. Now Sony and the Criterion Collection bring together the classic 25 movie run in one huge collection. The set will be released with a book containing the original short story by Kan Shimozawa that inspired the series plus essays and artwork. *Zatoichi The Blind Swordsman* will be out on Blu-ray on 19 November.



DOA6

More Detailed Mayhem Than Ever Before

The famed fighting franchise from Team Ninja and Koei Tecmo is back for another bout of bruising when *Dead Or Alive 6* arrives on the PlayStation 4, Xbox One and PC next year. New features include Danger Zones in each combat arena, where characters take extra damage for example by being knocked into electrified ring ropes, run over by a car, or blasted by explosives. The environments will be more interactive than ever. If a fighter is knocked into the crowd, the onlookers can shove them back into the arena, leaving them off-balance and vulnerable to a powerful strike. And then there are truly mad features like dinosaurs, giant tentacles and water slides that can drastically alter the course of a match, while the new game engine sees characters sweat and bleed as battle takes its toll. The action commences on 15 February.



NON-STOP Keep On Running

Originally released in 1996, *Dangan Runner* is the directorial debut of Japanese actor and director Sabu. The premise is a simple one. Planning to rob a bank, Yasuda (Tomorowo Taguchi) forgets his mask and an attempt to steal one from a convenience store results in Yasuda being chased down the street by shop owner Aizawa (Diamond Yukai). Their chase sees Aizawa run into a yakuza (Shinichi Tsutsumi) to whom he owes money and who then joins the pursuit. Their chase gradually pulls in rival crime syndicates and trigger-happy cops, even as the trio lose themselves in their sheer exhilaration of the experience. *Dangan Runner* will be released on Dual Format DVD and Blu-ray on 12 November from Third Window Films.



VISITING THE STUDIO GHIBLI MUSEUM

NEO'S RESIDENT J-POP IDOL MAHIRU RIDES THE CAT BUS TO REPORT...

Hi! MAHIRU KURUMIZAWA here, a member of the Japanese idol group Moso Calibration! Today I'd like to introduce you to the Studio Ghibli art museum in Mitaka City in western Tokyo. The museum's manager is Hayao Miyazaki who directed some of my favourite Studio Ghibli films, like *My Neighbour Totoro* and *Princess Mononoke*. He has also made this place easy to enjoy for people who are not familiar with the films.

When I visited I felt like here was the birth place of a new wave of animation. There are five rooms that each tell you something, and it made me realise how hard the team works to make a production. There's also a video exhibition room. In here you can see an original short animation by Studio Ghibli too.

On the rooftop there is the giant robot soldier from *Laputa: Castle in the Sky*. He watches us every day. And there's also the cat bus from *My Neighbour Totoro* – it's soooo fluffy!! You can even go inside, I feel like here is a special and unique place where you have a chance to touch the heart of Studio Ghibli.

If you visit, don't forget to go to the restaurant! You can eat Studio Ghibli themed food and buy original goods. When you come to Japan, you better go Studio Ghibli museum! Me and the giant robot are watching...

Keep in touch on Instagram (@mahiru104) and Twitter (@lunch_mahiru)!

JAPAN JOURNEYS

It's tricky to get tickets to the museum if you're outside Japan. But, if you'd like to visit, the experts at Japan Journeys have you covered! Check out japanjourneys.co.uk for itineraries that include a visit to the museum.



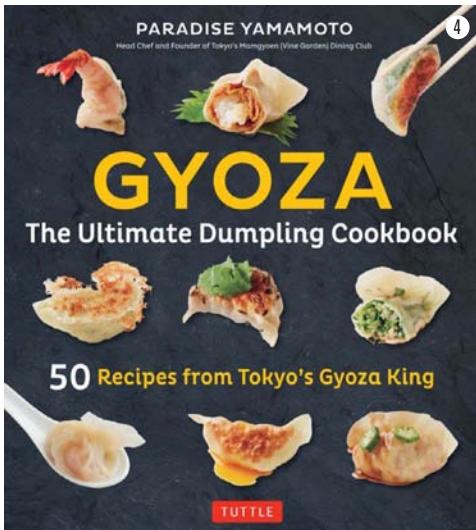
WE LOVE THIS STUFF!

Check out NEO's pick of the coolest merchandise around this month



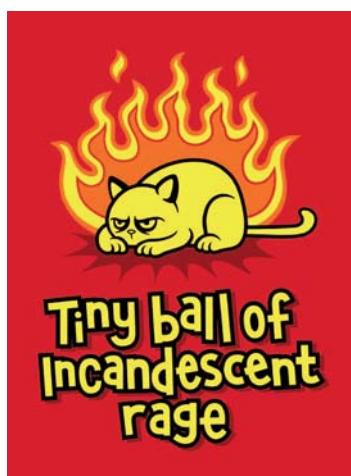
1. GUDETAMA CHOCOLATE RANGE

Celebrate Gudetama by eating themed choccies made by luxury chocolatier Creighton's. Available from £2.50 from www.tofucute.com.



4. GYOZA: THE ULTIMATE DUMPLING COOKBOOK

50 Recipes from Tokyo's Gyoza King



2. GENKI GEAR DESIGNS

Launching on 25 October from GenkiGear.com are these two great designs! Science Cat starts from £16 in a range of colours and sizes, on women's, kids' and unisex tees plus hoodies. Incandescent is part of the Super £10 range and available in one colour in unisex and ladies' designs.

3. THE ULTIMATE TOFU BAG

Save money and enjoy a kawaii surprise with Tofu Cute's amazing lucky bag that could include plushies, stationery, collectables, snacks and a drink! No two are the same: get yours for £24.99 from www.tofucute.com.

4. GYOZA: THE ULTIMATE DUMPLING COOKBOOK

Some truly inventive gyozas are on offer here in this recipe book by Paradise Yamamoto, including fried banana and mango, and bacon and egg carbonara! £12.99 from Tuttle Publishing.



5



5. MY HERO ACADEMIA POP ANIMATION FIGURE

Can't get enough of these cute chibis? Neither can we! Get your hands on this Shoot Todoroki figure for £14 from TokyoToys.com.



6. HATSUNE MIKU PIERRETTA FIGURE

This officially licensed SEGA Project Diva Arcade Future Tone Hatsune figure is priced £29 from TokyoToys.com!



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ANIME EXPOSÉ

REVUE STARLIGHT

Stage Magic



LAST ISSUE, WE praised the home release of *Sound! Euphonium*, about a set of shiny schoolgirls (plus a few boys) working together towards a grand performance, with conflicts, jealousies and heartbreak along the way. *Revue Starlight* would fit the same description, except that it goes into full fantasy at times, and there are no boys – all *Revue*'s characters are female. Well, the *humans* are all female, but we shouldn't forget the masculine magic talking giraffe which holds court in a secret theatre under the school and selects the best girls to become the ultimate stage performers, "Top Stars".

Before we go on, it's worth noting such a school feels *entirely ordinary* in 2010s anime. If the makers of *Revue Starlight* thought a talking giraffe in a magic theatre would surprise us, then they haven't been keeping up with recent anime like this spring's *Umamusume: Pretty Derby*. That had a school for *horse girls* (we repeat, *horse girls*), who run in Ascot-style races. That's our standard for weird now, matey!

Revue Starlight has links to some weird anime, which we'll explain later, but it's also a familiar-feeling high school drama, with a large ensemble of girls. We meet them in their second year, when they know each other already, with numerous pairings. They don't live with their parents, but share rooms with each other – unusual for high-schoolers, but then they're in an elite Tokyo school, Seisho Music Academy, that's famed for turning out the stage stars of the future.

Our heroine is Karen Aijo, an extremely normal anime girl. She's a

sleepyhead, talented but discombobulated, and far from the top of her class. Many of the scenes of her school life are very akin to other anime, but some have a lyrical quality that helps set *Revue* apart. In the first episode, we see Karen and her roommate / BF Mahiru come into the school dance studio in the morning and start practicing their dance moves. Then the other girls enter the studio, one by one or two by two, gossiping and teasing and limbering up, in an extended scene. Of course, it's a contrived way to introduce the cast to us, but it's also clever; the scene feels like the start of a stage play, each actor declaring herself to us in turn.

Not long after, there's a lovely non-fantasy episode about Karen and another key character, Hikari. Unlike the other girls, Hikari's a transfer student. She's also an old acquaintance of Karen, though at first she seems cold towards her former playmate. The episode explores their relationship when Hikari goes AWOL and Karen searches for her in Tokyo (breaking school rules, so her terrified classmates must cover for her). There's a long sequence when the two characters are talking on their mobiles as they roam Tokyo. The sequence edits pictures and dialogue together to compress the rambling journey and conversation into an elegantly compact sequence.

RESPECT THE GIRAFFE

If you want to be contentious, you might argue that such "real-world" devices are more interesting than *Revue*'s fantasy stuff with the underground



"IF YOU WANT TO BE CONTENTIOUS, YOU MIGHT ARGUE THAT THE 'REAL WORLD' OF THE SERIES IS MORE INTERESTING THAN ALL THE FANTASY STUFF WITH THE UNDERGROUND GIRAFFE."



giraffe. As we mentioned above, this long-necked patriarch periodically leads some of the girls into his huge underground theatre. Here, he gets them to express their feelings and desires through spectacular but non-fatal fights, fought with swords and arrows from classic stage tragedies. As the giraffe comments, the battles slowly turn more personal, fuelled by the girls' jealousies, frustrations and dreams, and especially Karen's childhood dream about the theatre, a dream she shares with someone else.

Fans have highlighted the fact that *Revue Starlight* is directed by Tomohiro Furukawa, who was involved in two surreal fantasies by Kunihiko Ikuhara, *Penguindrum* and *Yurikuma Arashi*. And yes, there are comparisons. For example, *Revue* has repeated magic-girl style transformations (like *Penguindrum*), and bizarre (if SFW) sex symbolism. *Revue* is a show that represents masculinity in a girls' world by way of a giraffe's long neck and a replica Tokyo Tower.

Neither are the most obvious phallic symbols!

But, in the three-quarters of *Revue* that we've seen, it doesn't approach Ikuhara's extreme levels of craziness and storybook surrealism. Indeed, as a fantasy about female stage performers, *Revue* is less trippy than the British film *The Red Shoes*, from which it seemingly draws inspiration.

More damagingly, it takes several episodes to get a handle on *Revue*'s characters even in the "real" world, let alone in the fantasy one. One plot arc in the second half, focused on a character nicknamed "Banana", rests on ideas and themes that you'll probably recognise from other anime. At worst, *Revue* can feel like a trite case of "cute girls doing cute things" mixed with Ikuhara-light fantasy (though we should specify that Ikuhara himself doesn't seem involved).

The upside: *Revue* is often joyful and charming. It's a show that dances light on its feet, with or without that giraffe lurking in the shadows. ●

ALSO STREAMING...



HOLMES OF KYOTO

Sherlock Holmes is endlessly popular in Japan, and was recently boosted by a certain cute British thesp called Benedict. This Holmes homage is set in modern-day Kyoto, and features a handsome youth who works in an antiques shop. Would you be surprised that his "Watson" is a schoolgirl? The next Holmes anime has already been announced... It'll be a series by Production I.G with another modern-day Sherlock, but this sleuth will operate in the lurid Tokyo district of Kabukicho (!). It'll air next April.



PLANET WITH

Described by Anime News Network as "one of the most entertaining and delightfully weird premieres of the summer," *Planet With* is one of those shows that takes standard anime ingredients and transforms them into an all-out oddball. The viewpoint character is a boy, who we follow through a baffling world where he contends with alien invaders, a superhero team and a human-sized cat (hey, it's no weirder than Disney's giant ducks, dogs and mice). The show was created by manga artist Satoshi Mizukami (*Lucifer and Biscuit Hammer*).



ANGELS OF DEATH

Horror fans, meanwhile, are catered for by *Angels of Death*, based on a video game. The two main characters are Rachel, a young girl who wakes in a building that's apparently in some Twilight Zone, or else a circle of Hell. Death-obsessed, she travels through the building in the company of a maniacal scythe-bearing man called Isaac. He's voiced in Japanese by Nobuhiko Okamoto, Rin in *Blue Exorcist*. Reportedly this is a fun horror series, OTT as only anime can be.

ANIME EXPOSÉ

ATTACK ON TITAN

SEASON 3

Where have all the Titans gone?



UPTILL THE end of season two, *Attack on Titan* was full of, well, attacks on Titans. There were flying circuses of humanity's finest, swooping from the sky onto those towering titular uglies, carving out neck-chunks and sending Titans toppling, all timed to the swaggering choruses of *Linked Horizon*. Or when the show *wasn't* doing that, it was full of surprise human characters turning into titans, outsized skulls and spines bursting into being on battlefields, as the creatures formed themselves from the inside out. Either way, *Titan* was titanic.

Now *Titan*'s third season takes a gamble as dangerous as any of its heroes' mad plans to save the day. It's downplayed the Titans and made the show about human conflicts instead. It's not surprising, really. Eren and co may swear to fight Titans forever, but TV audiences will tire of endless fights. You can try topping Titans with more Titans and bigger Titans and sexy Titans (don't look at me like that), but even they'll run thin in the end.

If you think of *Attack on Titan* as a zombie series (and it is a zombie series, kind of), then it's worth looking back at the classic films by Papa Zombie himself, George Romero. If you watch Romero's zom-pics like *Dawn and Day of the Dead*, you'll see that he gradually came to spend less time on zombie carnage and more on the humans trying to live in the zombies' world. Of course, that tactic endangers your popularity rating, as the makers of *The Walking Dead* found out. For some viewers, *Titan* sold itself as a monster-horror show, and it should be that with no deviation, a mother's blood forever raining on the streets.

Don't get us wrong, there's still action, and violence, and indeed torture, in *Titan*. Early on, there's an especially spectacular flying-wires zooming battle –

the first to involve rival human factions *without* any Titans. The fight is centred on the fan-favourite character Captain Levi, as if to assure us we're watching the right show and this still is *Attack on Titan*.

But the season also has lots of slow stuff. Conspirators in throne rooms drop hints like dandruff. There are drawn-out show trials, while crafty characters weigh up moves like chess pieces. There's even a fake news subplot; it's startling to remember that this world has a print press, even if it looks blooming useless at holding power to account. We suspect most people reading this article know about the season's story developments already. Briefly, our heroes find the discoveries they've made in the last two seasons – the mysterious Titan embedded in the wall, the hints that the girl Krista is somehow vital – have annoyed the authorities. Soon a vital witness is bumped off, snatch squads have targeted Eren and Krista, and even commanders like Erwin – a man so unflappable you forget he *had his arm eaten* in the last season – are being smeared as traitors. In franchise terms, all this plotting recalls the middle *Harry Potter* book *Order of the Phoenix*, where the establishment warred on wizards.

KENNY'S KRAZY KILLS

Soyes, it's a big change in pace. The Titans are largely off-screen for the early episodes, and the show relies on our investment in the human cast. There are no central characters any more. Krista – who now goes under her revealed true name, Historia – does have a juicy role, as we learn *loads* about her, but fans may still mourn the absence of her girlfriend Ymir and the rapport they shared.



There's a new adversary character, dubbed Kenny the Ripper, who's a laughably contrived creation. He looks like a Wild West gunslinger, indulges in mass-murder, and is a deadlier big "brother" figure to Levi... Oh, and there's another Kenny revelation that really prompts viewer howls of "Oh, come on!" Still, Kenny's fun, and Kenny *has fun*, and that's always a relief in a smile-scarce show.

Judging by the eight episodes available at press time, this third series falls short of the splendid season two. It's not as thrilling or surprising, despite massive story revelations and a revving up of action midway through. As with *Banana Fish* last issue, *Titan* relies on villains falling for tricks that the viewer spots at once – you might argue that they're not so obvious tricks in-world, but they still make for weak drama. But there's still loads of good stuff, like a moment of understanding and sympathy between Levi and a soul-stricken Armin – two characters who we don't usually think share anything. Later we meet a cannibal / religious cult which seemingly drives *Titan*'s world.

It's too obvious to be a spoiler that the Titans return eventually, huger and grosser than before. But the funny thing is, it's hard to complain about an ugly effect when the monster it's creating is really ugly anyway... ●

KAZUHIRO YAMAJI

Kenny "the Ripper" is voiced in Japanese by prolific actor Kazuhiro Yamaji, who often dubs Jason Statham, Hugh Jackman and Russell Crowe. He was the villain Todo in *Blue Exorcist: Kyoto Saga* and the grandfather character in last winter's time-stopping show *Kokkoku*.

New Novel

Recently a new spinoff *Attack on Titan* novel was published, *Garrison Girl*. What makes it unusual is that it was by an American writer, Rachel Aaron, an already prolific fantasy author. Set at the same time as the early anime episodes, her book is a side story following an aristocratic girl determined to do her bit against the Titans. The TV heroes are barely glimpsed, and one of the relationships in the book is very predictable, but this is a solid, enjoyable story in its own right.

Keeping Score

The original 26-part *Titan* anime covered the first eight manga volumes by Hajime Isayama; season two took us up to book 12. As of writing, the third season has just reached book 17; it's not clear how far it'll get. Isayama's currently writing book 27 of the *Titan* manga; all the signs are that the story's approaching its finale, but there's no official confirmation of an end-point. Will there be the "right" amount of manga material to fit into a TV season?

1. Armin can't stay innocent forever. 2. It's been a long time since Hange was playing with pet Titans. 3. Kenny the Ripper in full flight.



THAT SONG

The first sign that *Titan* Season 3 differs from its predecessors is its title song, which comes in shocking contrast to the hypercharged, martial songs for the previous seasons. The new song is a wistful, some would say anodyne, ballad called *Red Swan*. We dare suggest it can grow on you if you let it. It also melds well with the images of characters intersecting with their childhood selves and asking "Who am I?" The titles might have been inspired by Takahata's film *Only Yesterday*.

IN JAPAN, EVERYONE CAN HEAR YOU SCREAM

Halloween is taking off in a big way. Mark Guthrie shares with you some bone-chilling Japanese cosplay ideas that are guaranteed to terrify your friends!

ONE THING I adore about living in Japan is the way in which the Japanese take something of western culture that they like and just adopt it as their own, putting their own spin on it. Whether it be 'love hotels' for Christmas, the onus of gift-giving being solely on women at Valentine's Day, or hitting up 'Countdown Parties' before heading to a shrine at New Year's Eve, I love it. You could call it cultural appropriation; I call it cultural celebration

Halloween is another such event, and is a relative newcomer. While it has had a presence in Japan since the first Tokyo Disney Halloween Parade in 1997, it has only recently become a serious date on the calendar. In fact, when I first arrived seven years ago, it was still pretty much in its infancy, mostly celebrated by gaijin [foreigners] riding around Tokyo's circular Yamanote subway line in fancy dress, getting drunk and terrorising the locals.

But recently Halloween has blown up in a big way, and every year major cities are awash with spooky characters; but these are not kids with sheets on their heads pretending to be ghosts. No, in Japan, Halloween is very much a grown-up zone, with millennials – particularly women – taking over city streets, partying while TV camera crews wander amongst them, interviewing elaborately dressed revellers, much to the bemusement of the middle-aged presenters back in the studio.

When you consider how the penchant for cosplay is already so prominent in the society, it is perhaps not surprising that Japan has taken to Halloween with such aplomb. The Japanese love a good dress-up and are extremely dedicated when it comes to their costumes. However, without the history of Frankenstein's, vampires and werewolves, the Japanese turn to their own culture for their spooky guises. Here are a few spine-chilling ideas that you may want to adopt for yourself.

KUCHISAKE-ONNA: THE SLIT-MOUTHED WOMAN

One of the most popular costumes for women is that of Kuchisake-onna. She has her origins in an Edo era horror tale about a beautiful woman who masks her face behind a fan, propositioning passers-by. "Do you think I'm pretty?" she asks, lowering the fan, revealing a mouth slit open from ear to ear before slashing open the mouth of her unfortunate victim. Kuchisake-onna has in recent years been popularised by a series of terrifying movies, in which victims who reply to her question in the negative are rewarded by being sliced in half with a huge pair of scissors.

MARIO AND LUIGI: PLUMBING THE DEPTHS OF FEAR

Characters from popular culture are always well represented (you couldn't turn around without bumping into a Minion a couple of years ago) but as Japan is the home of Nintendo, the Italian plumbers are a common choice, with groups of friends donning the same outfit and travelling in packs. The best ones,

however, are the guys who take it one step further, applying grizzly makeup and scaring passers-by with their zombie Mario Bros masquerade.

SADAKO: WATCH HER, IF YOU DON'T WANT TO LIVE

The antagonist of the nightmare-inducing movie *Ring*, Sadako is the vengeful spirit of a psychic teenager murdered by being thrown down a well. Clad in a tatty white nightgown with her scraggly hair draped over her face, she takes her revenge on the cruel world by coming to life from a VHS movie and literally frightening to death those who watch it, proving once and for all that video is, in very literal terms, a dead media.

ONI: SCARY AND SUPERNATURAL

The demons of the underworld, these phantoms are gigantic ogre-like creatures with additional eyes, rippling muscles and long horns growing from their heads of wild hair, and are believed to be the cause of disasters, disease, and famine. With their bright red or blue skin wrapped in tiger skin loincloths, these giants carry heavy iron clubs in their clawed hands and are the true bogeymen of Japanese folklore.

HANAKO-SAN AND AKA MANTO: TOILET DWELLERS

For some reason there are a multitude of scary public toilet stories in Japan, of which Hanako-san is probably the most famous. The spirit of a World War II era girl who haunts school bathrooms, she is summoned by knocking three times on the door before asking, "Are you there, Hanako-san?" Hanako-san will reply "I'm here," and if the child dares to enter the stall, she will find a small girl with bobbed hair wearing a red skirt. Hanako-san then drags the child into the stall, butchering her to death.

Aka-manto, or the red cloak, was a devastatingly handsome man who, tired of the attraction his looks brought him, takes to wearing a cape and a mask and for some reason frequents public toilets. He offers the toilet-goer inside the cubicle two choices of coloured toilet paper: red or blue. A red answer will see them sliced open until their clothes are stained red, while a request for blue will result in them being strangled until their face turns blue.

GOZU: THE COW-HEADED MAN

The original story behind Gozu is based on a tale in which a village of starving peasants murder a cow-headed visitor before eating him, forever after which the village was cursed. This story is said to be so old that its entirety is lost to the winds of time, but to be told it frightens listeners to death. One urban legend has it that a school teacher somehow uncovered the old tale and relayed it to a bus full of pupils. Though they begged him to stop, in a trance, he continued. When he came round he found them all foaming at the mouth, each last one of them dead. ●

"IN JAPAN, HALLOWEEN IS VERY MUCH A GROWN-UP ZONE, WITH MILLENNIALS – PARTICULARLY WOMEN – TAKING OVER CITY STREETS, PARTYING WHILE TV CAMERA CREWS WANDER AMONGST THEM, INTERVIEWING ELABORATELY DRESSED REVELLERS, MUCH TO THE BEMUSEMENT OF THE MIDDLE-AGED PRESENTERS BACK IN THE STUDIO."



1

Photo by Aduldej via depositphotos.com.



2



1. Make like a zombie...
2. A *Bioshock* family in the Halloween parade in Kawasaki.
3. Only two of these can be the real Mario and Luigi, right?
4. Maid service? I think I'll clean my own room, thanks.
5. "Do you think I'm pretty?"



4



5



NEO ARTIST SHOWCASE

THE BEST IN READER TALENT

EVERY ISSUE, NEO WILL BE FEATURING OUR FAVOURITE WORK FROM ARTISTS INSPIRED BY ANIME, MANGA AND GAMES.



NAME CHOIZILLA

AGE 29

BASED IN LONDON

PROFESSION DESIGNER

FAVOURITE ANIME IT'S SO CLICHÉ, BUT MY FAVOURITE FILMS ARE ALWAYS STUDIO GHIBLI WORKS.

BIOGRAPHY

I'm a designer by trade and mainly work with artists in the music industry. Aside from work, I write for a Japanese rock music site, JROCK NEWS, so visual kei and rock music aesthetics has had a huge influence for this macabre and dark style. So far I've produced a couple of illustrations for their apparel range.

I tend to have a bias towards analog tools as I believe it is fundamental for creatives to use their hands to engage their mind. My go to tool is an inkwell and a dipping calligraphy pen whenever possible.

Typically, the illustrations I produce have a story – a fleeting feeling of melancholy, experiences in life. By materialising the abstract and sometimes mundane ideas into something real, it helps my reflective thinking process. Some are quick sketches, others take time, but each piece denotes the feelings at the time.

I often feel my favourite pieces – or the pieces others tell me they can most relate to – are ones which stem from a thoughtful idea. I believe a drawing made from a calm and mindful attitude is the pathway towards a soulful drawing.



SAKANACTION



INSPIRATION

As mentioned, Japanese rock music and its subcultures has been a huge influence in my style in the past. Illustrators such as Sachin Teng, Little Thunder, and Ana Godis are amongst my favourite artists to follow, so be sure to check them out.



3



4



1. AKUMA ROCK: When eastern demons meet western ghoul to form a band. **2. Sleepless:** Silent hours of being alone with your thoughts. **3. Break:** Can smoking kill the dead? **4. Listening:** Sometimes, no words are better.

NEO WANTS YOU

If you are interested in submitting work to be featured in the NEO ARTIST SHOWCASE, please email mail@neomag.co.uk with 'ARTIST SHOWCASE' as your subject header, along with an internet link with examples of your work.

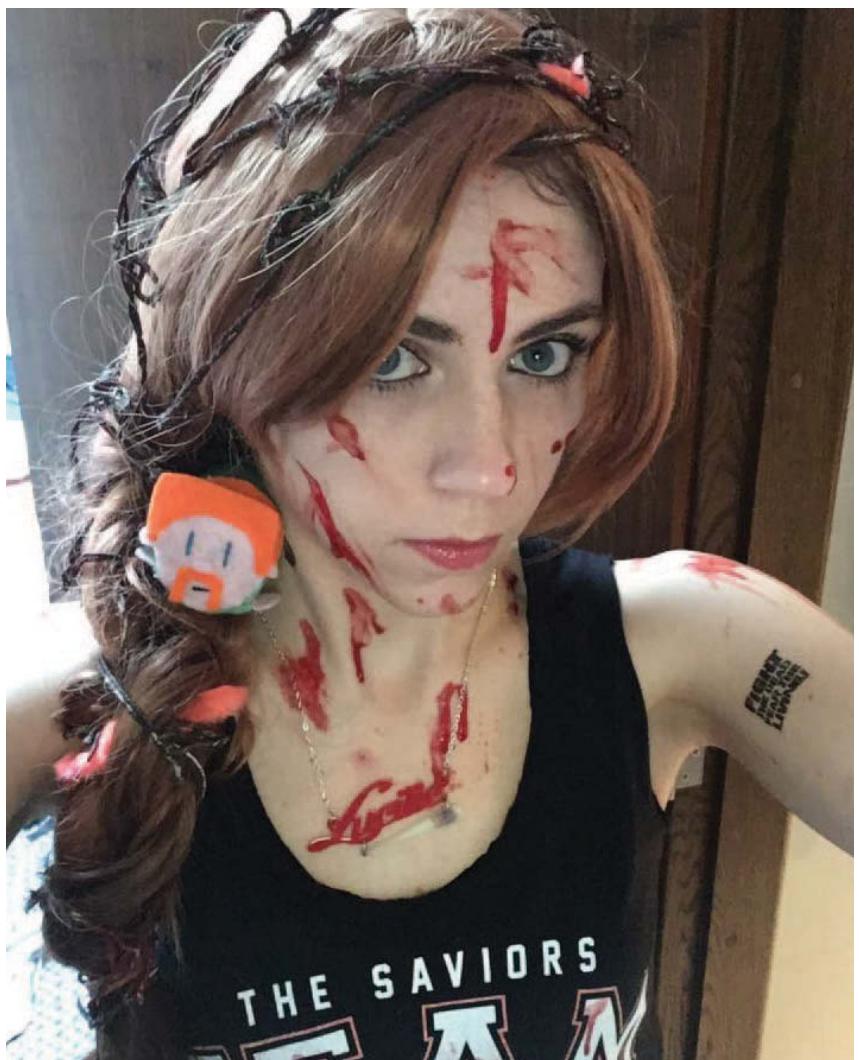
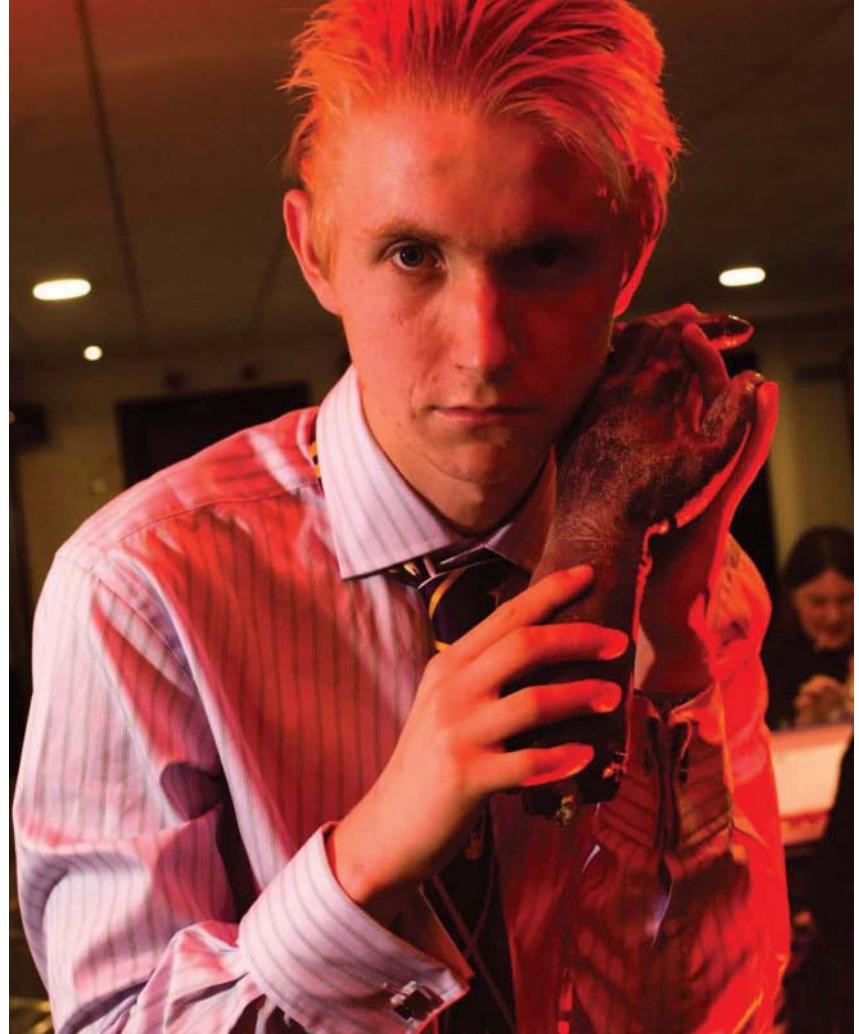
CREEPY COSPLAY

NEO READERS STRUTTING
THEIR STUFF!

[RIGHT] Yoshikage Kira from *JoJo's Bizarre Adventure* by Patt Jardine (@killer_caesar on Instagram). Photo by Nicholas Gray (www.nicholasgray.net).

[BELOW] Lee White as Skeletor!

[BOTTOM RIGHT] Isobel Griffey as Lucille from *The Walking Dead*. (instagram.com/allfandomscomeataprice)





[TOP] Sarah and Gary Oakley as Mr and Mrs Ghostface.

[ABOVE RIGHT] Kat McCulloch, ready to give you a fright! (Find her on at facebook.com/kat.s.mcculloch.)

[LEFT] Lup from *The Adventure Zone*, cosplayed by @divided_cosplay and photographed by @michaelthornberphotography, both on Instagram.

**CONTENT
WARNING:**
Not for the
faint of
heart



NEO'S FAVOURITE HALLOWEEN SCARES

We've collected together some of the best examples of Asian horror in a variety of genres, so you'll not be able to make it out of the Halloween season without a fright or two...



Berserk: The Golden Age Arc

ANIMATED SPLATTER

If buckets of blood is what it takes to get your heart pounding, we're pleased to tell you that there are an incredible number of gore fests designed for just that purpose. From MVM's upcoming cult-classic *When They Cry*, bundled in a three series collector's edition Blu-ray in November, to its complete series release of the medieval torture porn that is *Berserk*, there's something for everyone, whether you're into school-based slaughter-parties or war stories. *Akira* is one of anime's most striking body horror tales, with one of the characters being transformed into an all-consuming, out of control monster. For more sci-fi splatter, *Gantz*' story of a strange being that kidnaps humans

and forces them to brutally murder aliens is hypnotically grotesque and harrowing, while *Parasyte* is a far more paranoid tale, concerned with a boy, Shinichi, whose arm is taken over by an alien being who calls himself Migi. Shinichi must hide his parasitic invader while attempting to defend humanity from the other aliens who have much more successfully infiltrated human bodies. If you'd like a classic ghost story with some gruesome deaths, *Another* tells of a strange mystery surrounding a dead student who just can't seem to help turning up for class. Retro gore can be found in excess in *Angel Cop*, *MD Geist*, and plenty of other '90s shock anime.

FILM-BASED GORE

Horror has moved from the silent but deadly to the manically disgusting in recent years, and Japan has been an enthusiastic participant. Auteur Takashi Miike is behind some of the most shocking titles, including the sadistic yakuza thriller *Ichi the Killer*, the notorious *Audition*, and the frankly bizarre *Gozu*. From South Korea, Park Chan-wook is also eager to prove his country can be just as messed up, and his Vengeance Trilogy (*Sympathy for Mr Vengeance*, *Oldboy* and *Lady Vengeance*) tell a trio of tales of bloody revenge. Sion Sono's body of work is also worth checking out, particularly *Cold Fish*, the gritty tale of a charismatic serial killer – although his movies usually have a habit of torturing you psychologically, rather than with blood and guts.

When it comes to true video nasties, we won't recommend *Guinea Pig 2: Flower of Flesh & Blood* – it was so over the top that Charlie Sheen reportedly contacted the FBI, believing it to be a real life snuff film. And *Men Behind The Sun* is equally grim – a recreation of Japanese war crimes during WWII, it's as sickening and exploitative as you would expect. Nauseating scenes of self-cannibalism are on offer in *Splatter: Naked Blood*, and if you've not had your fill of gruesome, gut-churning sequences by that point, it's probably best to quietly see a doctor. More recent additions to the genre include *Tokyo Gore Police*, *The Machine Girl*, *Meatball Machine*, and the excellent zombie flick *Versus*.



Oldboy



Cold Fish



Ichi the Killer

CLASSIC ASIAN SCARES

Ring



SADAKO AND FRIENDS

If you ask most people what they think about Asian horror movies, their first thoughts will probably turn to the classic era of J-horror, which began with the release of *Ring* in 1998 and was followed up by a bevy of spooky scares from across Asia, including *Pulse*, *Shutter*, *Dark Water*, *Ju-On: The Grudge*, *One Missed Call* and *The Eye*. Many of these received Hollywood remakes with mixed receptions, but the originals still stand as truly frightening: we dare you to take a listen to the *Ring*'s video sound effect without shuddering!

These movies mostly relied on female protagonists or spooky presences, told simple tales of mysterious goings-on, and culminated in the revelation of the main monster – be it a white-clad, long haired ghost, or a scuttling blood-streaked horror that lives in a cupboard. When it comes to a good Halloween movie, these are absolute classics in every sense of the word, sure to leave you with lingering doubts that you're not really alone as soon as you turn off your light.

ORIGIN STORY

Ring was originally a novel by Koji Suzuki, and part of a trilogy which includes *Spiral*, and *Loop*, along with two new novels about the story, *S*, and *Tide*. But the character of Sadako has her roots in traditional Japanese dance and ghost stories spanning hundreds of years. The creepy movements Sadako makes were inspired partly by Butoh – check Ohno Kazuo's performance of a dance called The Dead Sea to see the link. And her appearance is based on a type of spirit called a yurei – a restless ghost who must be sent to the afterlife via rituals or emotional closure. Sadako's appearance carries with it some cultural weight that is probably lost on many western viewers. Both her white dress and her long black hair are based on the yurei, which in turn is based on the traditional appearance of female corpses for burial, dressed in white kimonos, and with their dark hair, usually pinned up in life, now loose and flowing freely.

Ring



Dark Water





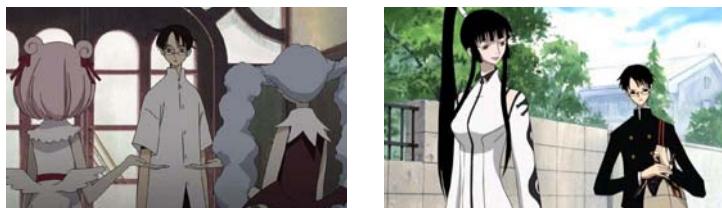
The Wailing

KOREAN SPOOKS

South Korea has produced some slick supernatural stories, from *The Uninvited*, also known as *A Table for Four*, in which a man is haunted by two young ghosts who sit at his dining table, to *A Tale of Two Sisters*, which features a series of terrifying hauntings set in a remote mansion in the countryside that culminate in some startling revelations. More recently, *The Wailing* is an effective horror based in an isolated mountain region where a cop has to investigate a series of murders with a supernatural origin.

XXXHOLIC

Manga collective CLAMP might be best known for bright and cheery series like *Angelic Layer* and *Cardcaptor Sakura*, but they have a darker side, and often fill their work with fantastical and sometimes horrific elements. *xxxHolic* was adapted into an anime, novel and TV drama and tells the story of a witch who owns a shop that can grant wishes, and a student who can see spirits. The art style of the series takes its influence from ukijo-e wood prints and captures a truly gorgeous spooky aesthetic.



Yamishibai: Japanese Ghost Stories

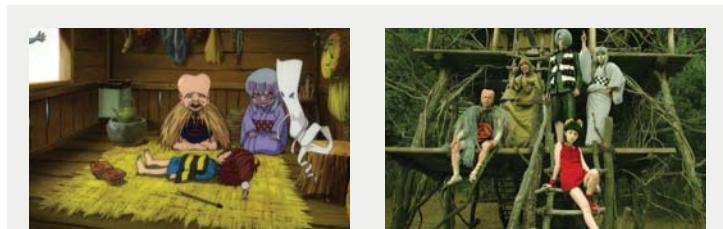


HOST STORIES

Our Man in Japan goes over some classic spooky ghost stories on page 032, so you can dress up like your idol, Kuchisake-onna, this Halloween. Unsurprisingly, Japan has plenty of its own unique ghost stories and urban legends, and anime series dedicated to them. Anime that include ghosts or other specifically Japanese supernatural shenanigans include *Hell Girl*, *Yamishibai: Japanese Ghost Stories*, *Requiem from the Darkness*, *Ghost Hunt*, *Ayakashi* and the follow-up *Mononoke*, and *Ghost Stories*.

ONIBABA

A classic black and white thriller, *Onibaba* is set in feudal Japan and features a mother and her daughter-in-law who make a living by selling weapons stolen from men they murder in the reeds. Their waiting for the woman's son to return is interrupted when their neighbour, Hachi, returns from war and starts a relationship with the daughter-in-law. Suspenseful, dark and menacing, this simple story is full of spooky scenes, including a demonic mask that brings a terrible fate to its wearer. Arguably, the birth of the J-horror genre.



GEGEGE NO KITARO

Absolutely Japan's most popular anime about yokai, *Kitaro* was created in 1960 by Shigeru Mizuki, and has spawned a sprawling franchise that includes hundreds of episodes of anime (the latest series of which just stopped running on Fuji TV in September this year), along with two live action movies. Kitaro is an immortal human boy who exists in the yokai world and tries to protect the human one from supernatural attacks. He lives in a graveyard and his dad is an eyeball. You should watch it.

YOKAI

Whole books have been written about the concept of yokai – a vast and complex collection of supernatural spirits and creatures from Japan. They include everything from possessed household goods (called *tsukumogami*) to the *ashiarai yashiki*, which is a filthy, giant, disembodied foot which demands to be washed. There are plenty of anime that feature yokai, including *Yokai Watch*, *Ushio & Tora*, *Nura: Rise of the Yokai Clan*, *Blue Exorcist*, *Yu Yu Hakusho*, and *InuYasha* – although, you should note, these shows are rarely scary. Even Studio Ghibli's *Princess Mononoke* featured *bakemono*, which are a class of shape-shifting yokai.



Blue Exorcist the Movie

SURVIVAL HORROR, APOCALYPSES, AND ZOMBIES



AND SO IT BEGINS...

You can't have a good survival horror without something going drastically wrong, and most of the time, it's zombies you'll be facing down. Although Japanese developers were not responsible for many of the early games now considered to be survival horror, the launch of *Resident Evil* popularised and solidified many of the concepts and mechanics that have become stalwarts of the genre.

Tokuro Fujiwara, co-creator of *Resident Evil*, first worked on 1989's *Sweet Home*, a Capcom role playing game based on a Japanese horror movie of the same name. The same year's *Project Firestart* by Electronic Arts placed the concept of

surviving against horrific and unrelenting enemies into a science fiction setting. Games like these, along with *Alone in the Dark* from 1992, set the stage for the first *Resident Evil* game from Capcom in 1996. The marketing bods used the phrase 'survival horror' to describe the claustrophobia of its mansion setting, the overwhelming sense of dread created by the unrelenting zombie horde, and the panic induced by the lack of weapons and bullets to be found in the game. Fixed camera angles lent the game a cinematic edge and upped the paranoia factor, and gamers loved it. A new genre was here to stay.



RESIDENT EVIL

From that first game in 1996, *Resident Evil* has transformed into a multimedia franchise that spans everything from live action movies to a themed restaurant, along with books, comics, and a huge library of games which have been rebooted and remastered. The basic storyline covers a variety of survivors who find themselves in a zombie-riddled wasteland after the nefarious multinational pharmaceutical company Umbrella Corp release a virus that turns the living into the undead. Each instalment builds on the overarching story, adding new elements to the mix and new mutations that create monsters even more terrifying than the last. The franchise has always been ready to experiment with its format, with the action being relocated to Africa in *Resident Evil 5*, and then to the US in the seventh instalment, which saw it experiment with a first person view. *Resident Evil* will return to consoles in 2019 as Capcom remake *Resident Evil 2* for the PC, PS4 and Xbox One – with new 'over the shoulder' mechanics.

SILENT HILL

Although *Silent Hill* perfectly captured the spooky isolation of small town America, it was developed in Japan for Konami by Keiichiro Toyama. The games usually follow a single protagonist who is searching for answers to a mystery – a missing daughter, a dead wife, the origins of a cult, and so on. In mist-laden locations that can transform into hellscape after a siren's wail, the *Silent Hill* games are some of the most genuinely scary and atmospheric horror games of all time.

Unlike its more successful fellow survival horror icon, *Resident Evil*, *Silent Hill* has had more trouble translating its spooky vibe to mainstream appeal. Perhaps because of the mind-bending nature of its otherworldly dimension, or the deep and complex symbolism and lore, *Silent Hill* has only managed a couple of mediocre Hollywood movies, and the franchise has been utterly stalled after the launch of *P.T.* on the PS4 – see over the page.





P.T.

Standing for 'Playable Teaser', P.T. is a short demo for a proposed instalment of the *Silent Hill* franchise, to be titled *Silent Hills*. The demo saw the player explore in first person a small house in a looped corridor circuit. Each loop contains a puzzle or some kind of clue which needs to be triggered to progress to a new loop. Macabre clues about murder, bloodied sinks, a relentless ghost, jump scares and truly bizarre scenes created unbelievable hype for the proposed game, which was to be directed by Hideo Kojima (*Metal Gear*) and Guillermo del Toro (director of many horror-fantasies including *Mama* and *Pan's Labyrinth*), and to star Norman Reedus of *The Walking Dead* as the protagonist. It all sounded too good to be true, and it was, as the game was cancelled and P.T. was deleted from the PlayStation store. A disturbing and mysterious end for an equally disturbing and mysterious game...

ATTACK ON TITAN

If *NGE* is Japan's answer to a futuristic apocalypse, then *Attack on Titan* is its answer to the past – if that included giant humanoids eating people, that is. We won't discuss the setting further because of spoilers, but suffice to say, if you dig end of world scenarios where humanity is hanging on by a literal thread and beset by powerful foes, you'll love *AOT*.



CORPSE PARTY

Corpse Party first appeared in 1996 as a doujin soft game, and was then remade in 2008 as *Corpse Party Blood Covered* for the PC, and *Corpse Party Blood Covered:...Repeated Fear* for the PSP in 2010. The basic plot concerns a group of students who are telling ghost stories at school, only to be transported into a haunted dimension by an earthquake. The games have a variety of possible endings, and most of them involve horrible deaths. Yay!

NEON GENESIS EVANGELION

If you're talking end of the world, you can't get much more iconic than *Neon Genesis Evangelion*, a sci-fi show which picks up after an alien invasion and sees a group of kids pilot mecha in order to fend off these so-called 'Angels'. Using bizarre symbolism from western religions, and delving into some experimental, mind-bending territory, *NGE* went where no other anime dared, and is a truly psychedelic – and horrific – experience.



I AM A HERO

If you ever read Max Brooks' amazing *World War Z* (just ignore the Brad Pitt movie, please), you may have been enthralled by the chapters about an otaku fighting the undead in Japan. Imagine if someone made a manga about it! Well, they did – Kengo Hanazawa's story is not based on the book, but the concept is deliciously similar: a manga artist called Hideo Suzuki must struggle to survive as Japan is overrun by zombies. It was also made into a live action film!

OTHER TITLES TO ENJOY

For zombie thrills, try the live action *Tokyo Zombie* in which two slackers escape the undead using their very limited skills and resources, or the anime *Highschool of the Dead*, which has a fairly self-explanatory concept. *GYO: Fish Attack* takes the zombie idea and turns it into a story about robotic fish. *Gunggrave* follows the undead Brandon Heat, trying to avenge his death. You also cannot miss the recent Korean movie *Train to Busan* – zombies on a train!

More survival horror games await you in the form of *White Day: A Labyrinth Named School* from Korea; *Hunting Ground* from Capcom; *Parasite Eve*, which uses role-playing elements from *Final Fantasy*; *Dino Crisis*, which is *Resident Evil* meets *Jurassic Park*; and *Fatal Frame*, where you defeat ghosts by taking photos of them. *Siren* used stealth elements to up the fear factor, while the most recent big-name survival horror from Japan is *The Evil Within*, by Shinji Mikami, who co-created *Resident Evil* along with Tokuro Fujiwara.

Train to Busan





BLOOD: THE LAST VAMPIRE

One of the most famous vampire franchises to come out of Japan began with *Blood: The Last Vampire*, an incredible, punchy, and action-packed short film written by Kenji Kamiyama, and animated by Production I.G. It introduced the serial-slayer Saya, a uniform-clad schoolgirl who hunted monsters called chiropterans on a US Air Base in Japan. Spoiler alert: at the end of the

film it is revealed that the chiropterans were not the only monsters stalking the corridors, as Saya turns out to be a vampire who is at least 100 years old. Subsequent instalments ran with the idea, and the katana-wielding Saya has appeared in two additional adaptations, *Blood+* and *Blood-C*. The original is still the best!

AND THE REST...

The Chinese version of a vampire – an undead creature that must feed on the living – is called a jiangshi, and quite logically, it hops. Because of rigour mortis, see. This has led to a host of movies featuring blood sucking hoppers, including the horror comedy *Encounters of the Spooky Kind* and *Mr Vampire*. (And more admittedly jiangshi-free supernatural comedy can be found in the cult classic *A Chinese Ghost Story*.)

On the anime front, the recent *Tokyo Ghoul* tells the story of vampires by another name and their struggle against mankind, told primarily from the point of view of Ken Kaneki, who was transformed into a half-ghoul. (Are these ghoulies vampires or zombies? We can fight about it later.) *Shiki* follows a young boy who moves to a village whose inhabitants are being murdered by vampire-like creatures. And who could forget *Vampire Hunter D*, *Trinity Blood*, or *Seraph of the End*?



HELLSING

Campy and vampy, *Hellsing* is probably the most famous (or should that be notorious) anime vampire franchise, following Alucard and Seras Victoria, two vampires whose job it is to exterminate their own kind on behalf of the Hellsing Organisation. Headed by Sir Integra Wingate Hellsing, who is obviously a woman, the group must battle against Nazi-vampires and the Vatican, because why not? Catholic imagery often crops up in anime as a shorthand for the spooky, supernatural and exotic, and this franchise is no exception.

The original 13 episode series was in production before the manga came to a close, meaning that it diverges from the source material. *Hellsing Ultimate*, which featured ten lengthy episodes, put that right in 2006, with the final instalment coming in 2012.



Encounters of the Spooky Kind

SATOSHI KON

The king of the psychological horror was undoubtedly the late, great Satoshi Kon. Responsible for possibly the best brain-twisting horror of all, *Perfect Blue*, one of Kon's hallmarks was to use the medium of animation itself to represent the shifting nature of his characters' realities. *Perfect Blue* in particular uses this to great effect to unsettle the viewer as its pop princess protagonist Mima slowly descends into madness when she is stalked by a crazy fan, unhappy with her change in career. *Paprika*, while not a horror movie as such, is a thriller that tells of a scientific technique that allows researchers to enter the dreams of their patients, and is an incredible, mind-bending experience and a celebration of animation as a medium. Kon also directed *Paranoia Agent*, a 13 episode anime thriller about a mysterious thug called Lil' Slugger, whose violent appearance prompts an investigation – and some soul-searching.



Perfect Blue



AND DON'T MISS...

Make a Venn diagram for horror, comedy, and musical, and right in the middle you'll find Takashi Miike's *The Happiness of the Katakuris*. A comical farce along the lines of *Tucker and Dale vs Evil*, a family try to start a B&B only to find all their guests die, one way or another. The psychedelic *House* from 1977 goes all out to remain one of Japan's weirdest horror movies of all time – and from this feature you'll know how much of an achievement that is. Horrific, shocking and unintentionally hilarious, *House* is definitely a brain-scratcher. For a jaunt through the subconscious and yet more confusion, pick up *Dreams*, a collection of short films based on the dreams of director Akira Kurosawa. And no

Haibane Renmei



AVANT-GARDE AND ELUSIVE

There are plenty of anime which defy explanation or neat categorisation – shows which would not necessarily be the first port of call when you're planning a night of frights and scares. But the slow-burning mysteries, the inconclusive stories, the true mysteries that leave you feeling unsettled and uneasy are just as much Halloween-worthy as a slasher flick. If you'd like to be baffled and confused by some truly weird anime, we'd suggest *Haibane Renmei*, which starts as a gentle series about girls who look like angels and slowly descends into madness; *Serial Experiments Lain*, about a girl who discovers the afterlife is on the internet; and *Boogiewoman*, about a series of murders said to be perpetrated by Boogiewoman – a creature who could very well be death itself. Interestingly, the former two both feature character designs by Yoshitoshi ABe.

Halloween feature could be complete without mentioning Junji Ito, the manga author who has probably scared more fans than anyone else with his creepy, bizarre and unique stories. Try *Uzumaki* or *Tomie*!

Have we forgotten your favourite? Made a frankly outrageous omission? Let us know on Twitter at @NEO_magazine!



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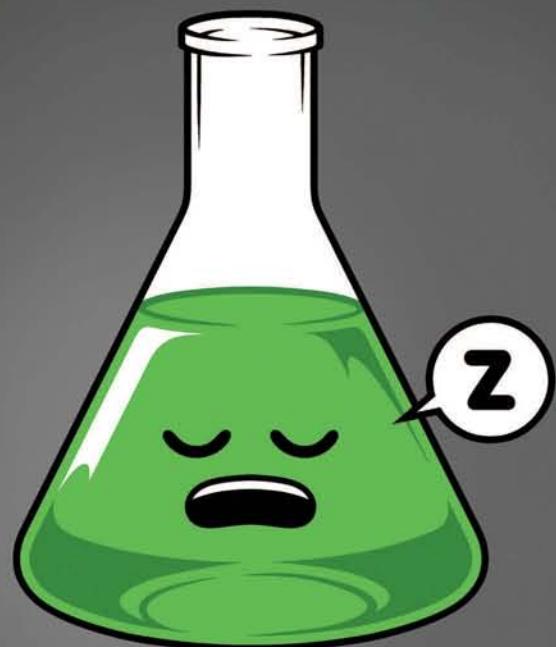
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NEW





NEO



WHEN THEY CRY

HIGURASHI NO NAKU KORONI

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NEO家



IN THE SMALL ADS
Adverts in *Life in a Hole* magazine include bespoke doughnuts, a woolly windbreaker, a cushion for those cold benches, face cream with unlikely properties and, as ever, magic trinkets that will turn your fortune around.

MANGA SNAPSHOT

LIFE IN A HOLE

Jonathan Clements has a secret taste of other peoples' misery

ISSUE #c.5 // DEBUT YEAR: 2017 // PAGE COUNT: C.500 // PUBLISHER: MY WAY // PRICE: 690 YEN (£4.88) // CYCLE: OCCASIONAL

ANGRY RED LETTERS are screaming it out down the side of the cover: "A SECRET TASTE OF OTHER PEOPLE'S MISERY." Manga about the trials of ladies in their 40s and 50s, promises another cover line. The actual title of the magazine itself, *Life in a Hole* (1), is tucked away behind all the shouting, along with the note that it is a spin-off title from the wonderfully named magazine *Pretty Bad Things That Really Happened (Honto ni Atta Kanari Hidoi)*. But I'm prepared to go out on a limb, here, and say that the cover claims of this magazine are deliberately misleading. The heroines within are often in their 20s or 30s, but I think the actual readership is maybe even a little bit older than the cover lines claim. Much as *Just 17* magazine was actually printed for girls who were not that old, *Life in a Hole* magazine is intended not for "ladies in their 40s and 50s", but ladies approaching retirement.

Just when the jaded manga critic thinks he's seen it all, comes *Dry Cleaner Detective* (2) by Yayoi Yokoshima. I'm surprised that nobody has thought of this one before, as plain-Jane spinster Miss Nakajima is a crime-scene investigator with a difference, waiting for the evidence to be brought to her little shop. This one has all the hallmarks of something that sounded good in the pitch meeting, but lacks the oomph to support a full series, as Miss Nakajima hoovers up the metadata - the shiny inside trouser-legs where a man who doesn't own a bicycle has been riding one for some reason; the distended ticket pocket where a cheating husband has been hiding a condom; the tell-tale straw and tin foil left in the jacket of a secret heroin addict.

Which is all very well, but as the manga uneasily acknowledges when two detectives turn up with a warrant, Miss Nakajima is in a trusted position, charged with dispelling people's mishaps, not grassing them up. It's not like she's helping a serial killer get bloodstains out of his shirt, but even so, if you were Bill Clinton trying to get a lady friend's dress cleaned, you'd expect the cleaners to clean it, not to ask you how it got like that in the first place.

But *Dry Cleaner Detective* is an outlier in a magazine that is far more concerned with the pitfalls of modern life - debt, deceit and frenemies. In *Friends* (3), by Kairi Wada, Ryoko is a happy housewife with two kids who finds herself drawn into the orbit of a manipulative woman. Initially, she is touched

by the generosity and kindness of her new friend Nobuko, only for Nobuko to start imposing on her with requests for help, last-minute favours, and in one moment designed to truly shock the home-making reader - dumping her laundry on her with a flimsy excuse. Ryoko supports her through the death of her father and her return to work, only to finally put her foot down when Nobuko invents a new crisis about being sexually harassed at work. It's not that Ryoko thinks nothing of sexual assault, just that Nobuko has been crying wolf about pretty much everything for months, and her need for constant venting is interfering with Ryoko's own life.

This is certainly an unfortunate story to arise in the age of #MeToo. I suspect that if Wada had her time again, she might flip some of the crises, so that the final confrontation over real and imagined tribulations isn't spurred by a conversation about sexual harassment. Because as the story stands, it's as if workplace groping is regarded as some sort of lesser issue, and rather than a matter of equal weight, belittled through Nobuko making it up.

Many other stories in *Life in a Hole* similarly focus on the concerns of an implied housewife reader - the heroine of *Elimination* (4), for example, who finds herself on the sidelines of a school bullying incident, or the young wife in *Grey Curse* (5), who must cope with the meddling efforts of an incompetent mother-in-law. In *Trouble Maker* (6), by Hisako Asobe, a housewife finds herself dragged inexorably into a pyramid scheme, and begins to despise the person she has become. Instead of genuinely helping her neighbours, she starts to regard them as fish ready to take the bait, as she hopes to sign up ten new customers for a 5000-yen bonus. And if that means waiting in the street for an "accidental" meeting, or teaching the woman next door how to use the internet so she can sign up, then so be it. It's only when she finds herself going through her neighbours' mail that she realises she has crossed a line.

In *Beneath Rock Bottom* (7) by Nuchi Yanagi, Masumi is a sullen shop-girl in a kimono store, not the least because two years earlier she was a high-flying businesswoman, laid off and struggling to make ends meet. She spends some time buttering up an old lady, telling her that what she really needs in life is a ridiculously expensive *obi* (belt) and that money >>>



KIMONO KLEANING?

Laundry facilities can be oddly hard to come by in Japan, particularly in tourist areas where there seems to be a conspiracy to force travellers to use expensive hotel services. Dry cleaning is much more common, because of all those office workers with posh suits, and kimonos that you just couldn't shove in a washing machine.

>>> is no object because she can pay for it in 36 instalments. The old lady's grand-daughter, Kanae, rushes in to stop her signing, only then realising that Masumi was her middle-school classmate only a few years earlier.

"I'm not surprised a girl like you would end up here," she snarls, "beneath rock bottom."

Yanagi's story is notable for the glimpses it permits of Masumi's life before this incident, and also hints of what is coming afterwards. We see her walking home through a shanty town piled of snoring tramps. Masumi, this manga whispers, is only inches away from losing everything, and debt is the thing that is sure to push her over the edge.

In a final scene, Masumi's boss is all smiles, telling her what a great worker she is, and letting her try on one of the poshest kimonos in the building. She sputters that she could never possibly afford it, and he slyly shows her a loan form, offering her 36 easy payments...

Debt is a common theme in manga for the older Japanese, seemingly because of the likelihood that it will touch most of them in some form or another. Owing to the awful dumpster fire that was the collapse of the Bubble Economy in the 1990s, Japanese banks are incredibly reluctant to make loans. The Japanese themselves, meanwhile, often regard bridging loans as a loss of face, which has led the consumer loan and small-business financing market in Japan to fill up instead with *sarakin* (salaryman lenders). Up to 14 million Japanese people, 10% of the population, are believed to have leaned on *sarakin* at some time in their lives.

But since *sarakin* are often connected to organised crime, their procedures can be alarming. The Japanese press is full of tales of outrageous loan rates, heavies putting on the

"IF YOU WERE BILL CLINTON TRYING TO GET A LADY FRIEND'S DRESS CLEANED, YOU'D EXPECT THE CLEANERS TO CLEAN IT, NOT TO ASK YOU HOW IT GOT LIKE THAT IN THE FIRST PLACE."

frighteners, and even men with loudspeakers standing outside debtors' homes, broadcasting their shame to the neighbours.

BEWARE OF THE INTERWEBS

Several of the stories in the magazine are devoted to Internet paranoia of such a hand-wringing, fearful stripe that it gives an awful lot away about the magazine's real readership. In *Tweets of the Devil: Motoko the Rumour Monger* (8), by Chiyoko Fujimori, Mrs Yoshii is back in the job market after five years away, presumably getting her kids up to school age. She starts a job at a primary school, where she soon realises that one of her fellow teachers is married to her former college sweetheart, Junichi. Before long, the two of them are flirting by text, only for the details of their conversations to make their way onto the Internet.

I don't know about other people's *misery*, but Fujimori's account of encountering an old flame is beautifully observed.



8

As Junichi bashfully asks her how she's been, her nonchalant real-life response is dominated by another panel in which she screams at him with tears in her eyes. Such subtextual histrionics seem to lurk beneath the masks of many of her colleagues, whose personal lives are soon upended on social media by the sarcastic quips of an unknown troll: Motoko the Rumour Monger. In a lovely closing touch, the gossip is revealed as Junichi's own wife, glamorous but unhinged, but Mrs Yoshii is left glumly wondering to herself. Were *all* the texts really sent by her tormenter, or could there be a chance that one of them *really* was from Junichi...? The question is left unanswered, although if she tries to answer it herself, she might create a whole new chain of unfortunate events!

A similar mistrust of modernity arises in *Misfortune Game* (9) by Bijo Kaoru, in which the kind-hearted Mrs Ito tries to introduce herself to her neighbours, only to discover that Ms Araki upstairs is a snarling termagant who hates everybody. This makes her only one of the likely trolls who have Photoshopped Mrs Ito's head onto a sex-line advert that's been plastered all over the neighbourhood. You know those interfering old ladies – one minute they don't know how to work Facebook, and then suddenly they're making their own porno fakes.

Why I Chose to Quit the Net by Mika Sugimoto features Miss Uchimura, a young lady who despairs at the sight of her fellow commuters faffing with their phones all the time. She's stuck to an old-fashioned flipper phone, and hence has missed out on the last decade of memes, trends and scandals. It's only when other mums, waiting for the school bus, tell her that she's missing out that she reluctantly gets a laptop and starts poking around the web.

Oh. My. God. Imagine if you'd lived a life without Google,



9

and suddenly discovered a world of recipes and shopping tips, a gaggle of new friends who photograph their dinner and selfie themselves in exotic locations. Miss Uchimura spends so much time online that she forgets it's her daughter's bedtime. Before long, she is agreeing to meet internet acquaintances in real life, some of whom turn out to be lovely, and some of whom turn out to be dangerous nutjobs. So, be warned.

There's something odd about *Why I Chose to Quit the Net*, and it comes from the disjunction between the way the women look, and the way the women speak. This magazine for self-proclaimed 40 / 50 year olds repeatedly focuses on ladies a generation younger than that, but with attitudes seemingly a generation older. Their ignorance and dread of the internet makes them sound like old ladies, but their clothes and hair makes them look like the cast of *Sex & the City*. I suspect that the implied reader of this magazine is actually at the older end of its claimed aged bracket, possibly even pushing retirement, while the stories it tells are less about others of her own circle, but scare-mongering tall tales about her daughter's generation.

That's my theory, anyway, that the woman who reads this is really taking a lurid and disapproving interest in her offspring, from whom she feels separated by a gulf of misunderstandings. The modern world is something that is not so much happening to the reader, but has an impact that she constantly frets about with regard to her children and grandchildren. Is her grandson being bullied at school? Did her daughter really marry the right man? What are they getting up to in the big city when they don't call for a week...? *Life in a Hole* is a magazine for women who are worrying about their daughters' lives – it's not about "other people" at all, it's about the people closest to us: our families. ●

ON THE SCAM

Last year, the company Japan Life filed for bankruptcy after it was denounced in China for a pyramid scheme selling "high-tech health products" including magnetisers and healing mattresses to vulnerable old people. No, we don't know what they are, either, but Japan Life was selling them for 30 years before someone pointed out it was all nonsense.



SEASON 1 PART 1



[ANIME REVIEW]

MARCH COMES IN LIKE A LION

The ultimate comedy-drama flip-flop

29 OCTOBER // ANIME LIMITED // DRAMA, COMEDY, PSYCHOLOGICAL, COMPETITION // £59.99 (COLLECTOR'S BLU-RAY) // 275 MINS // 11 EPISODES

PLOT Set amid the waterways of today's Tokyo, this is the story of one lonely boy, stricken by tragedy and guilt, and the three kind sisters over the river who try to pull him out of the dark.

March Comes in Like a Lion feels like it's at least two very different anime merged together, and possibly three or four. On the one hand, this is an intensely emotional "real-life" drama about a boy with depression and negative self-esteem, who's cursed by the same talents that make him exceptional. On the other, it's a broad, hysterically heartwarming comedy about that same youngster being lifted up by friends and neighbours, by the kindness of strangers, and by the most welcoming household in all Tokyo.

Treading over those different layers are a cartoon chorus of chattering cats and the hero's skin-creeping step-sister; that sibling relationship crackles with forbidden tensions. On top of all that, March is a "tournament" anime – the hero is a prodigy of shogi, a Japanese board game close to chess, filling many scenes with the relentlessly precise clicking of wood pieces on a wood board. But there are also karaoke-style video interludes to explain the rules of shogi to the audience... interludes which feature a second cast of cartoon cats, singing and dancing over

the shogi squares.

The wonder is that not only does this mishmash work, but it works beautifully.

The main character is Rei, a 17-year-old boy somehow living alone in his own apartment in Tokyo. Of course, many anime boys start their story that way, before a girlfriend drops out of nowhere for them. In Rei's case, there are believable reasons why he's living alone so young, but we don't find out all of them for several episodes. March starts some way into Rei's story; his background does get explained later, and explained clearly, but the show asks for the viewers' patience as the situation pieces together.

What's plain straight off is that Rei is a gifted shogi player who seems to feel little more than the wooden pieces he wields brilliantly. There's a continual water motif in the show's images, with Rei moving and acting as if he's fathoms deep in an invisible sea. Later, we learn water is one of the few things that makes him happy.

But Rei still has people who care for him. Three sisters – one adult, one middle-schooler and one super-bouncy toddler – live in his neighbourhood and invite him enthusiastically to their home to share their meals and sleep under their roof. Again – and this may irritate some viewers – how this relationship came about isn't explained straight off, though it is explained soon.

The bigger issue for viewers, though, may not be the parceled-out story, but rather the show's extreme shifts in style and tone. One moment we can be following Rei through his numbed life, framed and paced like an "arthouse" cinema film.

EXTRAS

English and Japanese soundtracks. Both the opening and closing music is provided by the band Bump of Chicken, which also provided the opening theme for another of this month's home releases, *Granblue Fantasy*.



And then he can meet someone who punctures that world and turns it into revved-up zaniness. Sometimes the sisters do the puncturing, but often it's an unstoppably positive and obsessive teddy-bear of a boy called Nikaido, who's Rei's shogi rival (with shades of Tomohiro in *A Silent Voice*).

The show's flip-flopping mood does get annoying at times,

"THE BIGGER ISSUE FOR VIEWERS, THOUGH, MAY NOT BE THE PARCELED-OUT STORY, BUT RATHER THE SHOW'S EXTREME SHIFTS IN STYLE AND TONE."

but you get increasingly used to it. It's central to the show, depicting a daily life where a person crosses between the stormy shadows of his own broodings and the toasty glow of voices welcoming him to their home mixed with the mewls of kitties begging to be fed. Again, the uplift of the early episodes, which focus on the sisters, threatens a descent into repetitive schmaltz, but the show evades that trap by highlighting Rei's darker, gnarlier, complex feelings next.

These next episodes also make *March* much more than the quasi-harem series it could be accused of being (with its boy protagonist surrounded by numerous females). Rei, we discover, is painfully aware of the dangers of being invited into someone

else's house; however kindly the host, such hospitality can go abysmally wrong. The oldest sister, Akari, is actually a pro in the hospitality business. Her part-time job is as a Tokyo bar hostess, which may raise fans' hackles, but which eventually gets an interesting, provocative defence delivered by another woman.

We've gone this far without mentioning that *March* is animated by Studio Shaft, a fact that's obvious in the Rei-centric sequences. The boy is shown making long, lonely journeys through and between frames of Tokyo daily life. Taken together, these frames are a quotidian accompaniment to one teenager's angst. The beating summer sun feels like an exploding A-bomb frozen in the blue heavens. The horribly uncomfortable scenes between Rei and his step-sister feel the most like a Shaft anime, at least to fans of the *Bakemonogatari* saga.

As for the cuter scenes, they seem entirely the work of female manga author Chica Umino, including umpteen amused handwritten comments scattered round her frames, exactly like a chatty manga. The sisters are frequently drawn as drawings even within *March*'s world – the middle sister Hinata is often presented as all acorn eyes and flushed cheeks. But their house is easily the show's most solid presence, all wood beams and embroideries and a family shrine to the sisters' loved ones who have gone before.

Not an easy-watch crowd-pleaser like last month's *Sound! Euphonium*, *March Comes in Like a Lion* is still a masterclass in building story and characters from two apparently incompatible tones. ●

✿✿✿✿

ADAPTION

March Comes in Like a Lion was also adapted as a two-part live-action Japanese film, released in March and April last year. In this version, Rei was played by Ryunosuke Kamiki, who's an anime actor too; he voiced the hero Taki in *Your Name*.



[ANIME REVIEW]

CHAOS DRAGON COMPLETE COLLECTION

Would you sacrifice a friend for the power of a dragon?

TBC // ANIME LIMITED // 15 // FANTASY, ACTION // 300 MINS //
12 EPISODES

PLOT All hope seems lost for the nation of Nil Kamui, sandwiched between two rival countries vying for supremacy. With the land torn apart and its guardian deity, the terrifying Red Dragon, proving to be dangerously fickle, can Ibuki – a descendent of Nil Kamui's royal family – help reclaim his country's independence?

Chaos Dragon comes with an impressive pedigree behind it – based as it is on a Japanese tabletop role-playing-game much like *Dungeons and Dragons*, and the efforts of an all-star team of writers including Gen Urobuchi (*Psycho Pass*), Kinoko Nasu (*Fate Stay Night*) and Ryogo Narita (*Baccano!*) who sat down and played the game for six nights; in the process generating the storyline for this animated incarnation.

With this wonderfully 'old-school' RPG premise you'd hope that *Chaos Dragon* could comfortably take its place amongst the greats of the fantasy genre, but unfortunately, it all turns out to be a classic case of "Looks great on paper, but..."

The show's biggest sin – and really, it should come as no surprise considering its attempts to accommodate the vision of five distinct writers – is one of over-complexity. Stuffed

to bursting point with a host of diverse characters – all with differing allegiances and backstories – just as you feel like you're getting a handle on things, the show's 12-episode runtime is up. The one upside to this smorgasboard of info-dumps and detailed world building is that the show really lends itself to being binge-watched. Taken in small doses, the dizzying whirl of plot threads is just too much to hang on to, but gobbled up in one indulgent marathon viewing session, the true vision of the show's creators starts to emerge. At its heart, a suitably 'edgy' plot gimmick; our hero Ibuki can only tap into his true power by sacrificing the life of someone close to him.

Thorny moral questions spin neatly off this premise – what if a friend offers their life willingly? Does failing to save the life of a friend in effect count as 'killing' them? But despite these strong foundations, the show is continually hamstrung by uninspired directing and dodgy CGI – the titular dragon looks like it was popped straight out of a 20-year-old videogame cutscene. Throw in a couple of decapitations, bucketloads of blood, and we're almost in 'so bad it's good' slasher movie territory. The show even has an end-of-episode 'scorecard' that handily informs us which of its characters have perished so far by daubing a big red cross over their heads. Cheap thrills, for sure, but thrills all the same – and in a show as inconsistent as *Chaos Dragon*, that's no bad thing at all.

An ambitious but often flawed fantasy epic that feels like it needs its very own rulebook to decipher. ●



IF YOU LIKE THIS

Fantasy fans are spoilt for choice: The likes of *Akame Ga Kill*, *Overlord* and *Grimgar – Ashes and Illusions* all feel like perfect partners to *Chaos Dragon*'s sword-and-sorcery action.



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SUPER MARIO PARTY

OUT NOW // PUBLISHER NINTENDO // DEVELOPER ND CUBE // CERT 3 // PARTY // £49.99 // 625 MINS // SWITCH

After a couple of poorly received experiments to the tried and tested formula in the franchise's more recent titles, *Mario Party* makes its debut on Switch, rebooted with its new *Super* moniker. Fans will be pleased to hear that the classic party mode has returned, with players moving separately around the game board, collecting coins by taking part in minigames and aiming to grab the most stars. These minigames feel fresh thanks to making excellent use of the Joy-Con controller's various functionalities, although the return of the standard *Mario* models, textures and sound clips made us yearn for a bit of presentational experimentation in future. As well as the classic mode, there are also a few fun competitive and co-op options on offer, plus limited online play.

Though not as radical a change as the new name might suggest, *Super Mario Party* is a great return to form. ●

★★★★★



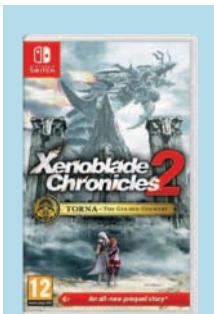
NINTENDO LABO: VEHICLE KIT

OUT NOW // PUBLISHER NINTENDO // DEVELOPER NINTENDO EPD // CERT 3 // INTERACTIVE MODEL KIT // £34.99 // 625 MINS // SWITCH

Having thoroughly enjoyed the construction side of things when we tried out the *Variety Kit* earlier this year, whilst feeling somewhat underwhelmed by the actual games that made use of our creations, *Nintendo Labo: Vehicle Kit* feels like a real step up in the main area where its predecessor was lacking. The cardboard models that you build this time take between half an hour (a nifty flight control stick) to over two hours (a car steering wheel with some seriously impressive inner workings) to construct, and along with a submarine control panel, they can be used to drive three vehicles in an open world adventure game that takes place on an island filled with over 80 objectives to complete.

If you're a newcomer to *Labo*, this is undoubtedly the best place to start. Great for kids and the young at heart! ●

★★★★★



XENOBLADE CHRONICLES 2: TORNA DLC

OUT NOW // PUBLISHER NINTENDO // DEVELOPER MONOLITH SOFT // CERT 12 // RPG // £34.99 // SWITCH

PLOT Set 500 years before the events of 2017's excellent *Xenoblade Chronicles 2*, the plot of *Torna - The Golden Country* follows partners Lora and Jin as they fight to defend the land of Alrest from the wrath of the Aegis Malos - a powerful Blade intent on wreaking havoc on the world.

In *Torna*, many of the original game's systems have been kept and others tweaked or refined. We loved the updated combat, which sees you switching characters mid-battle in order to restore health, inflict status effects and access different moves, and a neat, new crafting mechanic speeds up acquiring key items. As fans of side quests, we also appreciated their abundance here - though they have clearly

been used to add some artificial padding, as you're required to complete a certain number before the grand finale.

Graphics effects have been subtly tweaked to give parts of the scenery a smoother texture, while jazzy new additions to the soundtrack perfectly complement the already excellent music of the main campaign.

According to Nintendo, it's perfectly possible to enjoy this roughly 20-hour story either before, or - if you don't have the time for a 100-hour JRPG - instead of the main game. We'd certainly agree, but you'd be missing out on some of the backstory and references if you chose to do so. As it is, as much as we loved getting to know protagonist Lora, even some of the party members who also featured in the main game remained disappointingly underdeveloped.

A successful attempt at making a streamlined JRPG, though if you're on the fence about trying the main campaign, we'd urge you to give it a shot before tackling this! ●

★★★★★

DLC

In addition to the *Torna* campaign, *Xenoblade Chronicles 2*'s DLC Expansion Pass also adds a wide array of quests to the main game, plus a meaty Challenge Mode that allows you to unlock various costumes and Blades.



[ANIME REVIEW]

HIGURASHI SEASON 2 ('KAI')

The kids fight back

26 NOVEMBER // MVM // 15 // MYSTERY, PARANOIA // £39.99 (DVD) //
580 MINS // 24 EPISODES

PLOT The children of the country town Hinamizawa are still caught in the endless summer of 1983, circling round the fateful town festival and the catastrophes that follow. At last they're starting to break the preordained patterns – but is it too late to escape?

This second season of *Higurashi* is set up very much to complete the first, answering all (well, many) of the umpteen questions left hanging. At the same time, it feels very different from season one, which repeatedly pried a group of friends apart, leading each of them down separate paths to madness and murder. But the last few episodes suggested it didn't have to be like that, and season two shows what would happen if *Higurashi*'s characters stopped floundering around in their own hells and worked together.

(Spoilers follow.) We've already learned that one of the kids, the pint-sized shrine maiden Rika, is fully aware of the non-linear nature of events in the backwater town of Hinamizawa. Now it's revealed Rika has an invisible companion who might be a goddess, and that both of them are despairing of ever escaping this endless summer of doom. Yet Rika's "ordinary" (but massively motivated) friends, unburdened by her knowledge, are somehow evolving and maturing despite their timeless existence, and Rika is amazed

to start drawing hope from characters who she's seen die hopelessly over and again.

Whereas *Higurashi*'s season one was a true horror series, with characters making terrible decisions in stories they (and we) largely didn't understand, series two has a far more heroic outlook. That doesn't guarantee a happy ending – this is *Higurashi* we're talking about – but it arguably means *Higurashi* doesn't qualify as horror any more, and certainly not the same kind of horror as season one. In that season, for example, a central character resorted to murder to try to "solve" a ghastly situation of child abuse. In season two, he chooses other means instead, transforming from vigilante to a fight-the-system *legal* hero. The series itself eventually morphs into a conspiracy-action thriller, with a villain who's both chillingly ruthless and truly pitiful.

Far less shocking than season one, this is still nearly as good. Apart from bouts of shonky animation, this volume is hampered mainly by a sluggish start with little momentum and extreme goofing – it takes about five episodes to get going properly. Some viewers may complain that the lengthy subplots drag out too long, but the payoffs are strong and satisfying. Some of the first season characters are sidelined – twins Shion and Mion only get to shine at the end – but the characters who are used are deployed very well indeed. The ending completes the TV story – the upcoming "Season 3" is a much shorter OAV spinoff.

Not as good as the outstanding first season, but still a very satisfying watch. ●

★★★★★

INFO

Japanese and English tracks. The anime is adapted from a series of "Visual Novel" games, which have also been turned into live-action; there was a film in 2008, and a TV series a couple of years ago.



[ANIME REVIEW]

AMANCHU!

Tranquil Waters

29 OCTOBER // ANIME LIMITED // 12 // SLICE OF LIFE // £59.99
(BLU-RAY) // 300 MINS // 13 EPISODES

PLOT When the shy and anxious Futaba moves from the city to the ocean town of Shizuoka, she meets Hikari – a scuba diving-loving girl whose personality is opposite to hers in almost every way. But the two quickly become friends, and along with their school Diving Club, Hikari introduces Futaba to the joys of diving.

Drama, romance, sudden twists – these are the things that usually keep the viewer watching until the very end of a great anime series. So it might be odd to say that while *Amanchu* doesn't have much of these things at all, this doesn't necessarily work to its detriment.

Amanchu comes from that rare breed of slice of life that takes those genre traits at their most literal, in that it truly tries to capture what feels like everyday life for its characters. It's often slow, and dramatic tension is at an all-time low, but in its place you find yourself in this rich, colourful and above all peaceful world you almost wish you could be a part of.

Leading the series is the team of Futaba (quickly nicknamed "Teko") and Hikari (aka "Pikari"), whose budding friendship is where most of the show's charm lies. Not only do we get to see Futaba slowly come out of her shell and power through her anxieties, but we also see beyond

Hikari's happy go lucky nature and just how perceptive she can be when it comes to her best friend.

Their stark difference in personalities is also emphasised in the show's strange visual quirks, which often sees Futaba's face transformed into that of a befuddled chibi whilst Hikari becomes a gawking muppet. It takes some getting used to as the more realistic character designs are particularly good, but the change between them quickly becomes so effortless that it's hard to imagine the show done without them. The primary cast is propped up by two additional older club members and their teacher / club supervisor, but as good as these characters are, none of them work on quite the same level as the leads.

For a series that takes place around so much water, it's also refreshing just little of a fan service element there is to *Amanchu*. A few odd jokes and a plot line about pants aside, the presentation of the show also lives up to its wholesome content – putting the act and enjoyment of scuba diving above anything else.

While it doesn't feature a whole lot of diving in itself the series does still take plenty of time to explain some of the finer details of the activity, making it a somewhat educational experience on top of everything else.

Amanchu's relaxed atmosphere and minimal story certainly won't be to everyone's tastes, but its sheer tranquility and loveable characters gives it a unique charm that just can't be denied. If you're after something a little lighter, than this is one to "dive" right into. ●

✿✿✿✿✿

SPOOKY SINGERS

Opening theme *Million Clouds* is sung by Maaya Sakamoto, whose many anime voice roles include 500 year old vampire queen Shinobu Oshino from the *Monogatari* series. It is Halloween after all!

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THIS ISSUE WE have a very special collector's edition of *Valkyria Chronicles 4* to give away to a lucky NEO reader! The PlayStation 4 collector's box features some amazing bonus additions, which mean it's an unmissable purchase for fans of the franchise – and you can also purchase it for the Nintendo Switch and Xbox One, as well as standard editions of the game for all three consoles. The *Valkyria Chronicles 4: Memoirs from Battle Premium Edition* costs £89.99 to purchase, but read on to discover how you can win your own!

Contained within the boxset is a copy of the game, plus an exclusive vinyl statue of the Hafen tank, ready to take on the snowy battlefields of Europa, as well as a 100 page themed artbook that is styled to look like Claude's travel journal as it tells the story of the game through photos, notes and memories. The set also includes two DLC adventures featuring Squad 7 characters.

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TERMS AND CONDITIONS

No correspondence will be entered into. No employees of Uncooked Media or the companies providing the prizes may enter. No cash alternative is offered to these prizes. Entries are only valid if they reach us by the closure date. Multiple entries will be disregarded. The publisher's decision is final. Good luck!

DRONE

MAGAZINE

A close-up, low-angle shot of a DJI drone's camera system. The central camera is a Hasselblad model with a 28mm F2.8-F11 lens. The DJI logo is visible on the side of the body. The background is dark and out of focus.

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[ANIME REVIEW]

DIGIMON: DIGITAL MONSTERS

DigiDestined for Greatness

29 OCTOBER // MANGA // PG // ACTION, COMEDY, SCI-FI // £99.99 (DVD) // 4513 MINS // 205 EPISODES

WHERE'S THE MOVIE?

The *Digimon* TV series' have seen several releases in the UK now, but *Digimon - The Movie* hasn't been released since 2001.



[FILM REVIEW]



OPERATION RED SEA

Look out world, here comes China!

29 OCTOBER // CINE ASIA // 18 // ACTION // £11.99 (DVD) / £15.99 (BLU-RAY) // 138 MINS

TRIVIA

Operation Red Sea was inspired by the Chinese Navy's evacuation of Chinese citizens and foreign during the civil war in Yemen in 2015. The Jiaolong Commandos are a real unit.

PLOT When a civil war breaks out in the north African country of Yemaire, Chinese citizens are caught up in the violence. A squad of Chinese Navy commandos are sent to rescue a hostage from the extremist group Zaka, only to discover the terrorists are planning to construct a dirty bomb.

Director Dante Lam goes into full Michael Bay mode with *Operation Red Sea*. Character and plot are secondary concerns to a parade of numbingly loud action scenes packed to the brim with explosions. Lam adopts Bay's trademark style of never letting the camera stop moving, and editing at a pace that would

own strengths, and thanks to how vastly different they are from one another, it never feels as if the series is rehashing events.

Spanning from 1999 to 2003, it's not unreasonable to say that owning this is owning a important part of history in children's animation, and the topics that each series tackles are valuable lessons. Friendship, happiness, morality, death and grief are among some of the topics which *Digimon* tackles across these four seasons, and Toei Animation has done a terrific job at treating them with care.

Prepare to get emotionally invested and to feel as if you have a personal stake in the battles, and fate of both worlds, because the characters are so darn likeable.

Digimon never forgets – despite the tonal shift between each season – that it's an adventure with a bunch of kids and digital monsters just wanting to do good for each of their worlds. ●

★★★★★

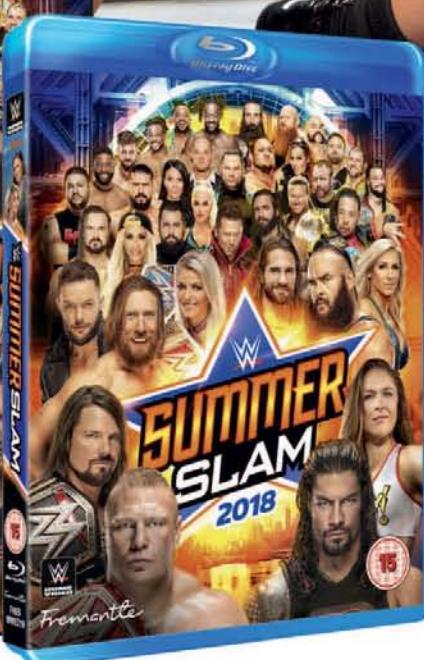
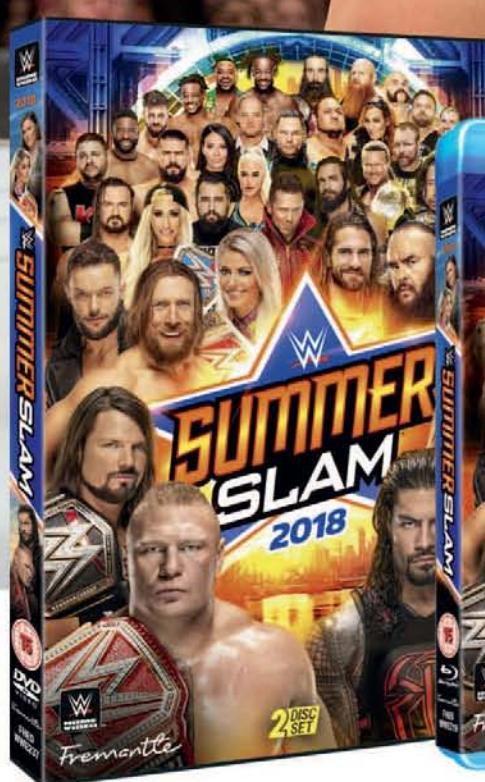
WORDS BY DAVID WEST



tire an overexcited toddler. The script taps into the nationalistic spirit of Wu Jing's *Wolf Warrior 2* and like Wu's film, *Operation Red Sea* was a huge hit at the Chinese box office. However, what it lacks is a compelling lead. The only character with more than a sketch of a personality and back story is reporter Xia Nan (Hai Qing), while the dirty bomb plot is almost an afterthought. Instead, the movie hurtles along from one ear-shattering battle to the next, each gorier and tougher than the last, as the commandos are gradually ground down and chewed up but fight on until their mission is accomplished.

Alongside *Wolf Warrior 2*, *Operation Red Sea* is another indicator of how China increasingly views itself as a superpower with a responsibility for global security. But as a movie it's exhausting. ●

★★★★★



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DISGAEA 1 COMPLETE

OUT NOW // NIS AMERICA // CERT 12 // ACTION, COMEDY, SPRG // £49.99 (SWITCH), £49.99 (PS4)

Available in HD for the very first time, *Disgaea 1 Complete* delivers the best version of the game that kickstarted the series back on PS2 in 2003. It follows Laharl fighting to earn his rightful place on the throne after the Overlord, his father, passed away. There's new content in the form of Etna Mode, which follows an alternate story where Etna aims to be Overlord after accidentally killing Laharl upon his awakening, leaving you with plenty of content to sink your teeth into.

The series' distinct art style shines brighter in HD, and there's a generous amount of customisation options for when you create the members of your army. You'll need to create members of each class, as each is a great help in various battles, and you're able to create dozens of characters.

A great entry point to the series, and a fabulous remaster. ●

★★★★★



DRAGON BALL Z KAI FINAL CHAPTERS: PART 2

12 NOVEMBER // MANGA // 12 // ACTION, COMEDY, SCI-FI // £34.99 (DVD), £39.99 (BLU-RAY) // 575 MINS // 22 EPISODES

PLOT The Majin Buu saga finally gets underway, featuring some of *Dragon Ball Z*'s greatest battles against one of the Z Fighters' strongest villains. Majin Buu wreaks havoc on Earth and it's up to the Z Fighters to stop him (funny that, really...), which is made a little more difficult thanks to Vegeta's jealousy of Goku.

The last few episodes of the World Tournament saga come to an end with the first few episodes of this box set, featuring a Vegeta who'll stop at nothing to finally beat Goku. Deciding that he was better off evil and without his new friends and family, Goku has no choice but to defeat Vegeta and stop him from attacking innocent people, before Babidi can

AH, FINALLY!

Manga UK worked hard to release *The Final Chapters* in the UK, with the last release in the *Kai* series being in 2015.



ORGIES OF EDO

19 NOVEMBER // ARROW VIDEO // CERT 18 // EXPLOITATION // £24.99 (BLU-RAY) // 94 MINS

Director Teruo Ishii explores erotic obsession through three stories in this release, each with a twist in the tale. The first sees a woman tricked into becoming a geisha by her lover; in the second a wealthy lady is obsessed by men with deformities; and in the last a sadistic lord finds the perfect masochistic lover.

Originally released in 1969, *Orgies Of Edo* benefits from beautiful costumes and sets, most particularly in the first chapter wherein a man chases a woman through a location lined with patterned fabrics. Inevitably, there's a lot of female nudity but all the characters, male and female, meet unhappy endings, so no one escapes unscathed.

Overall, less distasteful and slightly more arthouse than many of Ishii's later works. ●

★★★★★

WORDS BY MITCHELL LINEHAM



successfully enact his plan of summoning Majin Buu. Sadly, the Z Fighters fail to stop him.

Majin Buu makes his intent of devastation clear the moment he's free from his egg, leaving the Z Fighters scrambling to stop him. It's not simply the Goku and Vegeta show here, with Gohan, Gotenks, and more getting their time in the spotlight as they each tackle the mighty foe with all of their skill and heart.

There are a handful of new scenes and re-recorded lines in *KAI*, and they look and sound incredible. It's personal preference if you prefer the new or old lines, but some are undeniably changed for the better. This is a great collection for fans of the *DBZ* franchise, and we can't wait for more!

The Majin Buu saga gets straight into the action, packing in excitement episode after episode. *Dragon Ball Z* is nearing its climax, and there's no sense of it slowing down with Majin Buu on the loose. ●

★★★★★

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Yasuhiro Wada

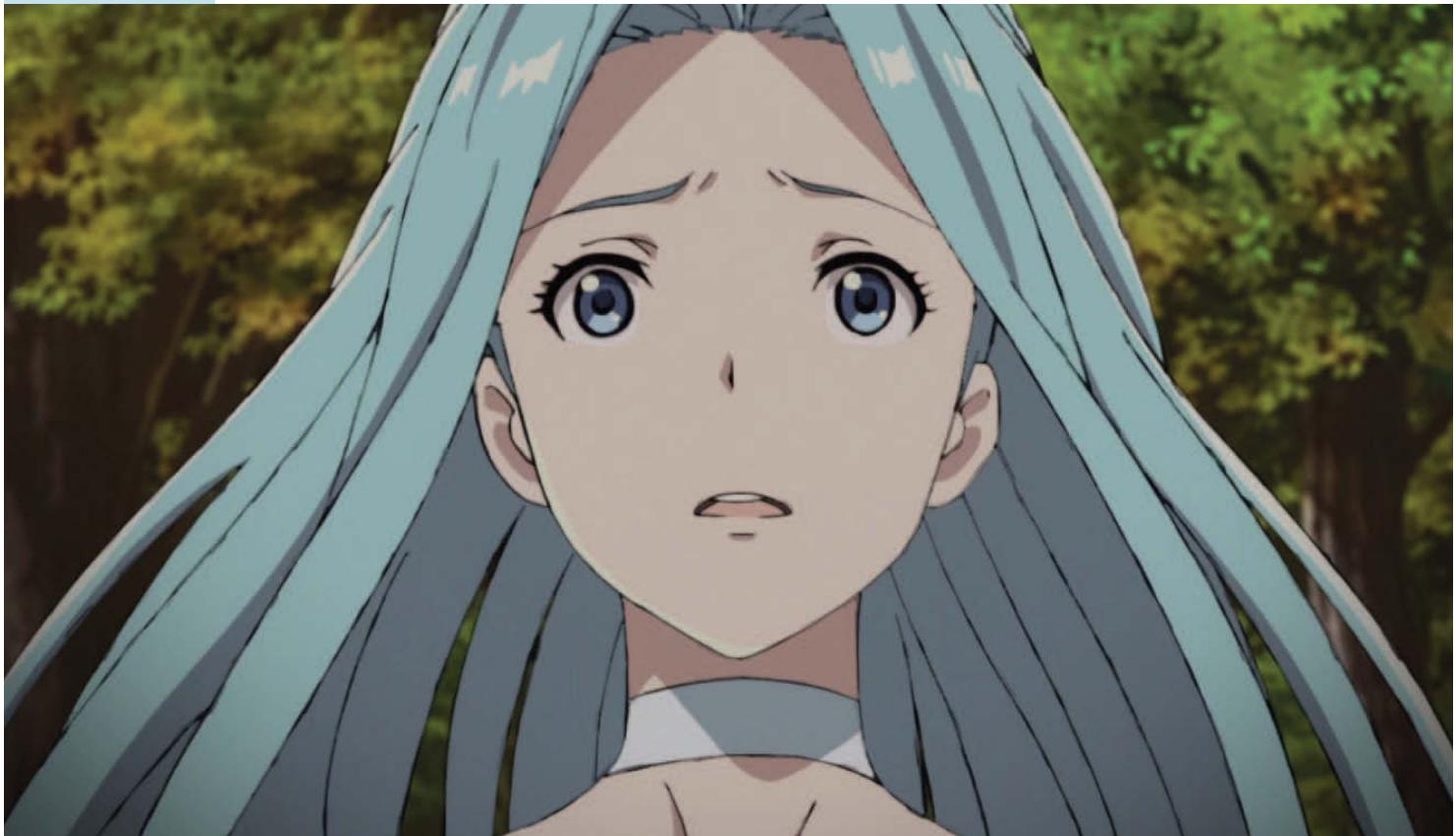


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[ANIME REVIEW]

GRANBLUE FANTASY THE ANIMATION PART 1

Not the quickest quest

12 NOVEMBER // MVM // 12 // FANTASY, ADVENTURE // £24.99 (DVD) // 170 MINS // 7 EPISODES

PLOT In a world where islands float in the heavens, young Gran dreams of finding his long-vanished father, who sought a legendary island. Then a beautiful girl, fleeing from this world's cruel "Empire," drops into Gran's life and he'll embark on the journey of his dreams.

By the end of part one of *Granblue Fantasy*, our young, handsome and intrepid hero has found a beautiful amnesiac maiden in the woods, crossed swords with the soldiers chasing her, got killed by a many-headed monster and been restored to life by the maiden who shares her "life force" with him. Perceptive viewers will notice this series isn't exactly reinventing the story wheel.

There's no reason it has to. Old-school quest fantasies can be perfectly pleasurable without doing much new, especially when they're brushed up with pretty visuals, and A-1 Picture's designs and backdrops are very pretty. (One of the cities that the show visits is seemingly modeled on France's Mont Saint Michel). Although the show's based on a video game, there are no gatecrashing gamers from our world making meta-jokes.

It's a Dungeons & Dragons-style world, where the hero has a mini-dragon sidekick and there are kings and spell casters and folk with furry ears. The different kingdoms float in a blue sky

which you traverse on airships of various designs – neat, though familiar from plenty of other games and anime.

But the disappointment of these first seven episodes is less their familiarity and more that they're just not as lively as they should be. They start fairly well, but once the main journey actually commences, it struggles to be exciting, with lots of chases and face-offs that are – honestly – rather dull. Of the middle episodes, there's only one point where things build to something truly awesome, involving a mega-storm, a dragon-goddess firing lightning, and our energetic hero taking her on in freefall. No, it's still not new – if you watch Hollywood CG movies, you should find the spectacle reminiscent of at least two recent films, one with a panda. But as we say, originality isn't the issue here.

If you're watching the Japanese subtitled version, one of the characters we meet midway is practically an old friend from another anime. He's a sky-sailor called Rackam, voiced by actor Hiroaki Hirata to sound extremely similar to "Tiger", the mature superhero in *Tiger & Bunny*. Rackam is one of the better realised characters so far, but he has feeble competition. Really, none of the other players have made an individual impact yet – they're well designed, but try catching them having an *interesting* expression or reaction. The thin running gags they're given – aw, so the ickle *lickle* mini-dragon hates everyone calling him a lizard – don't help.

Good presentation and some lively spots, but neither the action nor the characters have enough life so far. ●



EXTRAS

Audio available in Japanese or English with optional subtitles. The second part of *Granblue Fantasy* is due from MVM in December.

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WORDS BY ANDREW OSMOND

NEO RELEASE ROUND-UP

THE STATE OF THE UK MARKET THIS MONTH

IT'S NOT CHRISTMAS yet, despite what retailers would have you believe, but we're being served up extra-large helpings of favourite franchises, courtesy of Manga Entertainment. We review one such buffet this issue – a DVD set collecting the first four seasons of *Digimon: Digital Monsters*, carrying 200 episodes and 70-odd hours of the ever-mutating franchise.

That comes out on 29 October, which is also when Manga releases two similarly hefty DVD collections. One contains a full five seasons of *Yu-Gi-Oh!*, or more than 80 hours of card dueling. The other is the *Dragon Ball Z Movie Collection*, which carries 13 film-length adventures of the DBZ characters, as well as a couple of TV films.

Moving to Manga's other franchise titans, part two of *Dragon Ball Z Kai Final Chapters* is reviewed this issue, and comes to DVD and Blu-ray on November 12. There's also an individual edition of the fourth season of *Digimon: Digital Monsters*, individually titled *Digimon Frontier*, on DVD on 29 October. A week earlier, 22 October sees the 19th *One Piece* collection and the latest *Pokémon* movie collection – the latter has three films and is subtitled *X&Y*. *Naruto Shippuden* followers, you'll need to wait a bit longer. The next serving will be Box 34, and that's not due until 19 November.

The big new entries include *Love & Lies* on Blu-ray from MVM on 5 November – it's a series set in a Japan where the government arranges all marriages, but not everyone agrees. Anime Limited has the first 11-part volume (Season 1 Part 1) of the drama *March Comes in Like a Lion* as a Collectors Blu-ray on 29 October – see our review this issue.

October 29 is jolly busy all round – it also sees Anime Limited's DVD and Collector's Blu-ray of *K – Return of Kings*; the scuba diving series *Amanchu* as a Collectors' Blu-ray (see our review); a new standard Blu-ray outing for that KyoAni oldie *Lucky Star*; and Season 1 of the gay comedy-drama *Junjo Romantica* on Blu-ray. Manga also weighs in with a new Blu-ray edition of Makoto Shinkai's film *5 Centimeters Per Second*, and MVM with Part 2 of *The Asterisk War* on Blu-ray and DVD.



Most of the other releases are MVM ones, with the *Grimoire of Zero* Collectors Blu-ray / DVD edition now due on 5 November and *Granblue Fantasy* Part 1 on Blu-ray on 12 November (see review). Season 2 of *Higurashi* emerges on DVD on 26 November (see review), a week after a Blu-ray that collects all three of that show's seasons. Anime Limited also has *Junjo Romantica* Season 2 pencilled in for Blu-ray on 19 November. ●

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[FILM REVIEW]

BLEACH

Shinsuke Sato (mostly) rises to the challenge

OUT NOW // NETFLIX // CERT 15 // ACTION, FANTASY // STREAMING // 108 MINS

PLOT Ichigo (Sota Fukushi) has been able to see ghosts since childhood. When Rukia (Hana Sugisaki), a strange girl armed with a sword, appears in Ichigo's home, he is dragged into the conflict between the Soul Reapers, who guide souls to the afterlife, and the Hollows that prey upon the living.

Just as advances in computer graphics and visual effects have enabled American filmmakers to bring comic heroes to life – dominating the global box office in the process – the last decade has seen a glut of manga adapted into live action films in Japan.

Results have been mixed at best, but director Shinsuke Sato has a better track record than most of his contemporaries with the two excellent live action *Gantz* movies and *The Princess Blade* to his name. With *Bleach*, he faces a similar challenge to the one posed by *Gantz* in that he has to take a sprawling fictional universe and cram it all down into a digestible feature film that can stand on its own merits. For the most part, he succeeds.

In his favour, he has two strong leads. As Ichigo, Sota Fukushi doesn't get to go through the classic superhero transformation arc that takes him from nerd to hero

like Peter Parker in the *Spider-man* franchise. Ichigo is handsome, cool and popular right from the start. He easily handles three skateboarding punks who knocked over a shrine to a little boy, and has his classmate Orihime (Erina Mano) almost swooning at his feet from the very outset. What makes the character work is the humour and energy Fukushi brings to the role. He never becomes too brash, shouting is kept to a minimum, and he's not afraid to be funny at his own expense.

The chemistry between Fukushi and Hana Sugisaki is excellent too. Playing a much more likeable character here than she did in Takashi Miike's *Blade Of The Immortal*, Sugisaki threatens to steal the spotlight from Fukushi in the early going. There's a fun montage, complete with rock music, for when Rukia trains Ichigo to fight Hollows, and the scenes of this diminutive girl deftly outfighting her much larger sparring partner are terrific. Unfortunately, Rukia is left on the sidelines for almost all of the crucial final act and that's when the energy fizzles out a little.

The screenplay, by Sato and Daisuke Habara, seems a trifle hazy on what exactly the Soul Reapers are all about. Rukia initially explains that they exist to guide the dead to the afterlife, to defeat Hollows, and protect the living. It's that last one where things get messy. In the first fight with the Hollow that attacks Ichigo's family, Rukia is injured and transfers her powers to Ichigo, so he can fight in her stead. This really ticks off Rukia's older brother, Byakuya (Miyavi), who is a big cheese in the Soul Reapers, because humans

IF YOU LIKE THIS

In 2001, Shinsuke Sato's *The Princess Blade* took the premise of Kazuo Koike's *Lady Snowblood* and supplanted it to a futuristic setting with action choreography by Donnie Yen.



aren't supposed to possess Soul Reaper powers. Despite the fact that Rukia has a plan to get her powers back from Ichigo, Byakuya orders her to kill him and sends out another Reaper, red-haired Renji (Taichi Saotome) with instructions to kill them both if she fails.

"IT'S TOO SOON TO CALL SHINSUKE SATO JAPAN'S ANSWER TO JOSH WHEDON WHEN IT COMES TO BRINGING MANGA TO THE SCREEN..."

How that fits in with protecting humans is really unclear. If Reapers are free to kill inconvenient humans, why does Rukia fight so hard to protect Ichigo at the start? Is there any moral code behind the Soul Reapers, or can they kill whomever and whatever they please, including eliminating their own members? Sato's film doesn't answer any of these questions and the screenplay struggles to make room for Renji and Byakuya to have time to reveal any depth to their characters.

The final act begins with Ichigo facing the Hollow known as the Grand Fisher, after which he then has to fight Renji and Byakuya, so the cathartic release of seeing the hero defeat the big, bad monster is undercut by him then

having to fight two more foes. None of this feels sufficiently personal to any of these characters. Ichigo is pulled into events he scarcely understands, and it's not clear what is at stake for Byakuya that drives him to behave so ruthlessly towards his own sister. Miyavi is given such precious little time onscreen that Byakuya is more plot point than personality, robbing the finale of much meaning. Similarly, the script throws in Uryu Ishida (Ryo Yoshizawa), who is a Quincy, but what that means will be a complete mystery to anyone not a dedicated fan of the manga or anime.

Action scenes are strong and visual effects are generally of a high standard, although it's occasionally clear that the weapons are computer generated. Some of the best fight scenes are the training duels between Ichigo and Rukia, which emphasise her speed and skill against his clumsy rushes. The larger scale battles of the final act are much heavier on effects and might actually have more impact if they unfolded slightly more slowly to highlight the characters' movements, rather than rendering everything at such a frantic pace. And Ichigo survives rather than triumphs, which is an underwhelming choice, dramatically speaking.

It's too soon to call Shinsuke Sato Japan's answer to Josh Whedon when it comes to bringing manga to the screen, yet *Bleach* is more of a hit than a miss. Some characters suffer from being given such scant attention although that's balanced by the film's overall sharp, sassy tone. ●



TRIVIA

Bleach reached #4 at the Japanese box office when it opened in July. It was outsold by *Pokémon The Movie: Story Of Everyone*, *Mirai*, and *Jurassic World: Fallen Kingdom*.

MANGA EXTRACT THE ALIBI

By Ross Cheam

THIS ISSUE WE have a suitably grim story for our Halloween special as we preview the first 11 pages of *The Alibi* by Ross Cheam – start reading on this page, at the top right, to begin this tale of murder!

These pages “lay out the crime, the evidence and the key players in the case,” Cheam told us. “This was the first time I’ve had a crime to explain, so it was a fun challenge to find a way of showing the evidence that’s easy to follow and engaging, but also makes the reader feel part of the investigation,” he added.

“This extract also establishes the mother / daughter dynamic and that Megan, the daughter, is unwillingly her mother’s intern for the summer. This, of course, soon changes once they start investigating.

“*The Alibi* is about Veronica Sexton, a journalist and her law student daughter, Megan, as they investigate a murder that took place over 15 years ago,” he explains. “With only a few months left until the man convicted of the crime is executed, Veronica and Megan must race to find answers before it’s too late.”

Of the action in the story, he tell us, “This is not a conventional whodunit / murder mystery. *The Alibi* explores the process of investigating crimes years later – questioning the original investigation and legal cases rather than being able to necessarily find key evidence or a smoking gun after so much time has passed.”

We asked Cheam to tell us why he decided to write about a true crime case. “I am an avid podcast fan, true crime especially. While listening to the podcast *Serial*, I was fascinated by how it had become just as much about the journey of the journalist following the clues as it was about the actual crime. This stood out as a great foundation for a comic.”

Of his influences, Cheam told us, “When it comes to my drawing style I swing between more western comic styles and more manga styles. This comic is definitely more on the western side of the spectrum though there are some moments, such as Megan’s exaggerated responses, that definitely echo those manga / anime influences.”

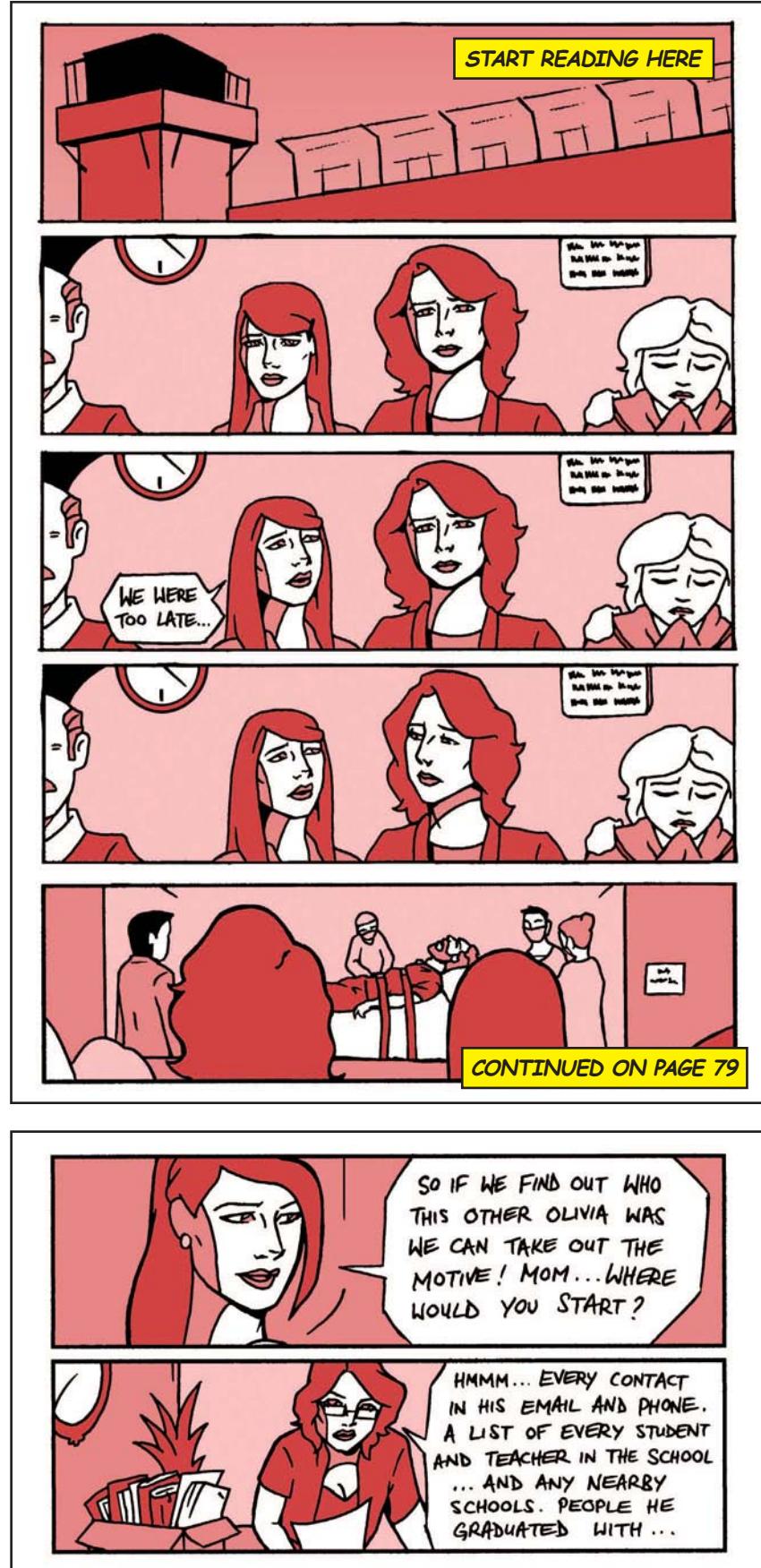
Of specific titles that have influenced him, he told us, “Dark thrillers such as *Death Note* and *Psycho-Pass* are certainly up there. *Death Note* to me will always stand out as such a unique concept and the way it played out was constantly unpredictable and exciting.”

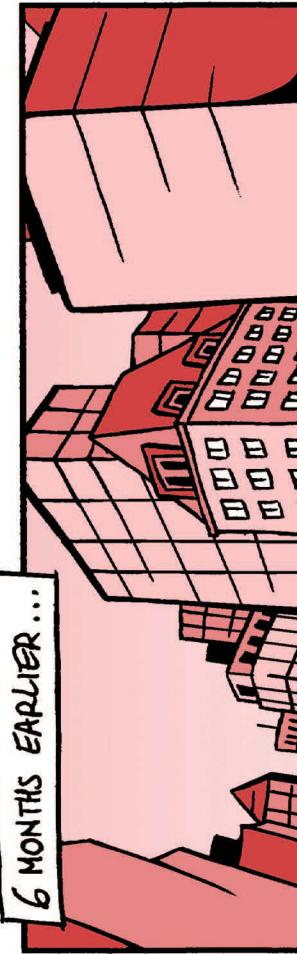
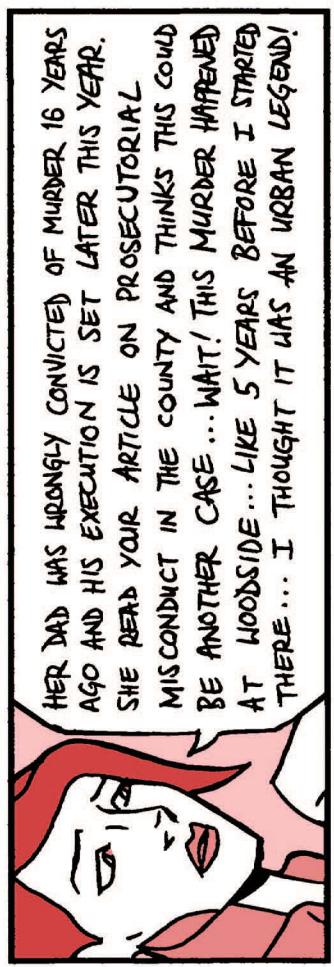
“True crime podcasts like *Serial*, *In the Dark* and shows such as *The Keepers* are among my favourites. I recommend anyone who is also a fan of true crime to check out *Crime Writers On* as that’s where I get great true crime suggestions and reviews, and, in fact, two of the Crime Writers make a brief cameo in *The Alibi*.”

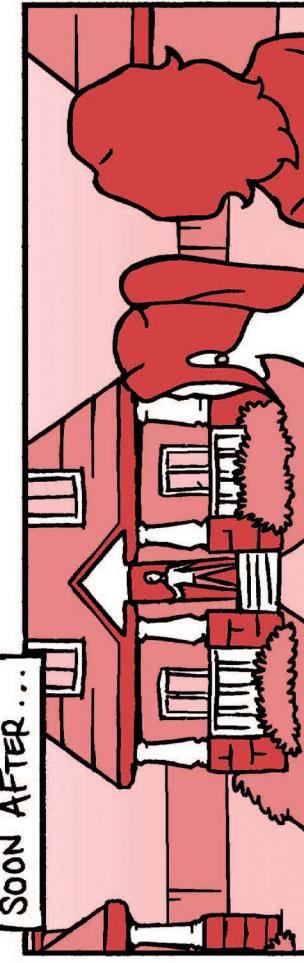
Of his previous work, Cheam told us, “I have self-published a few comics over the years and released a sci-fi / action comic called *Armed* earlier this year.”

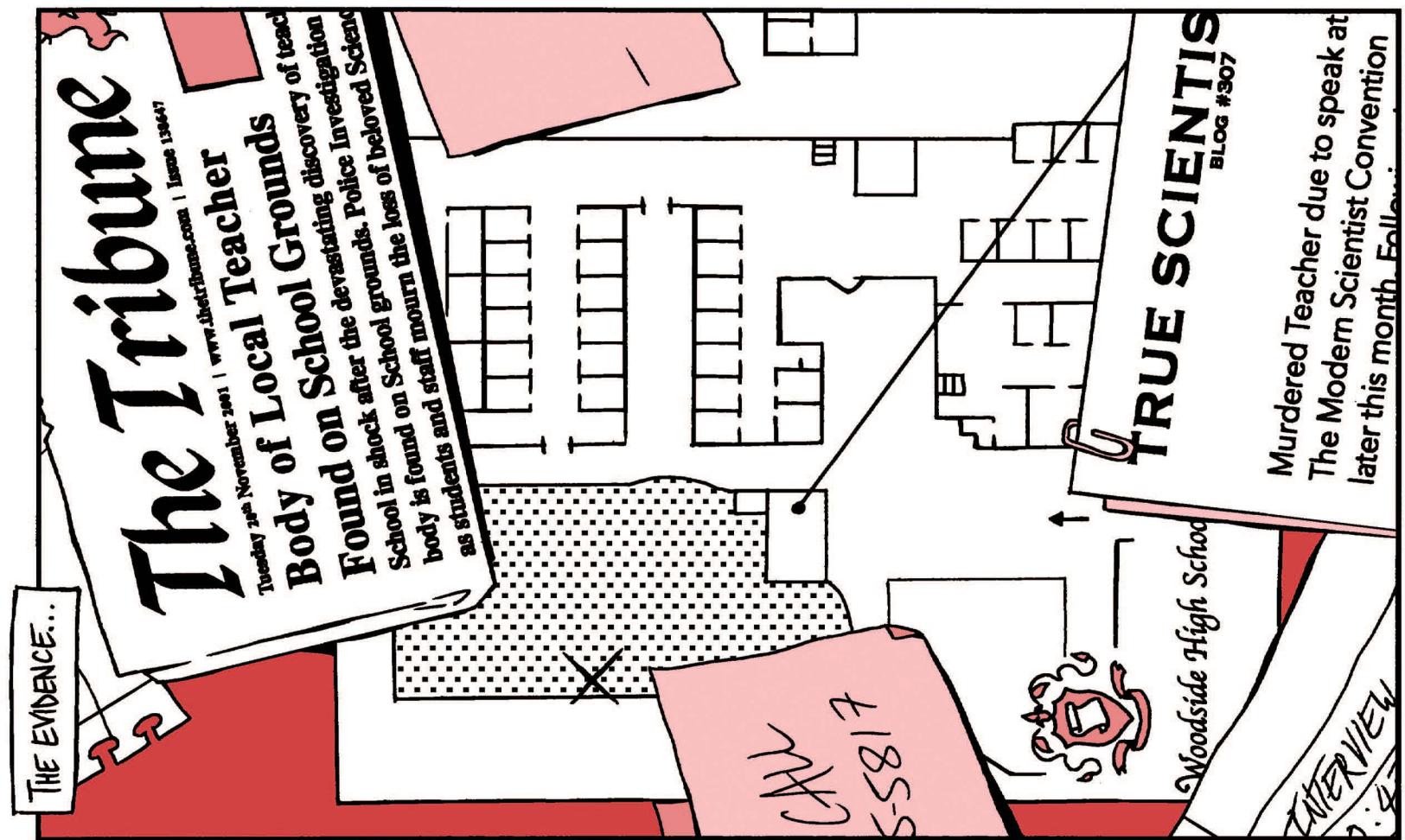
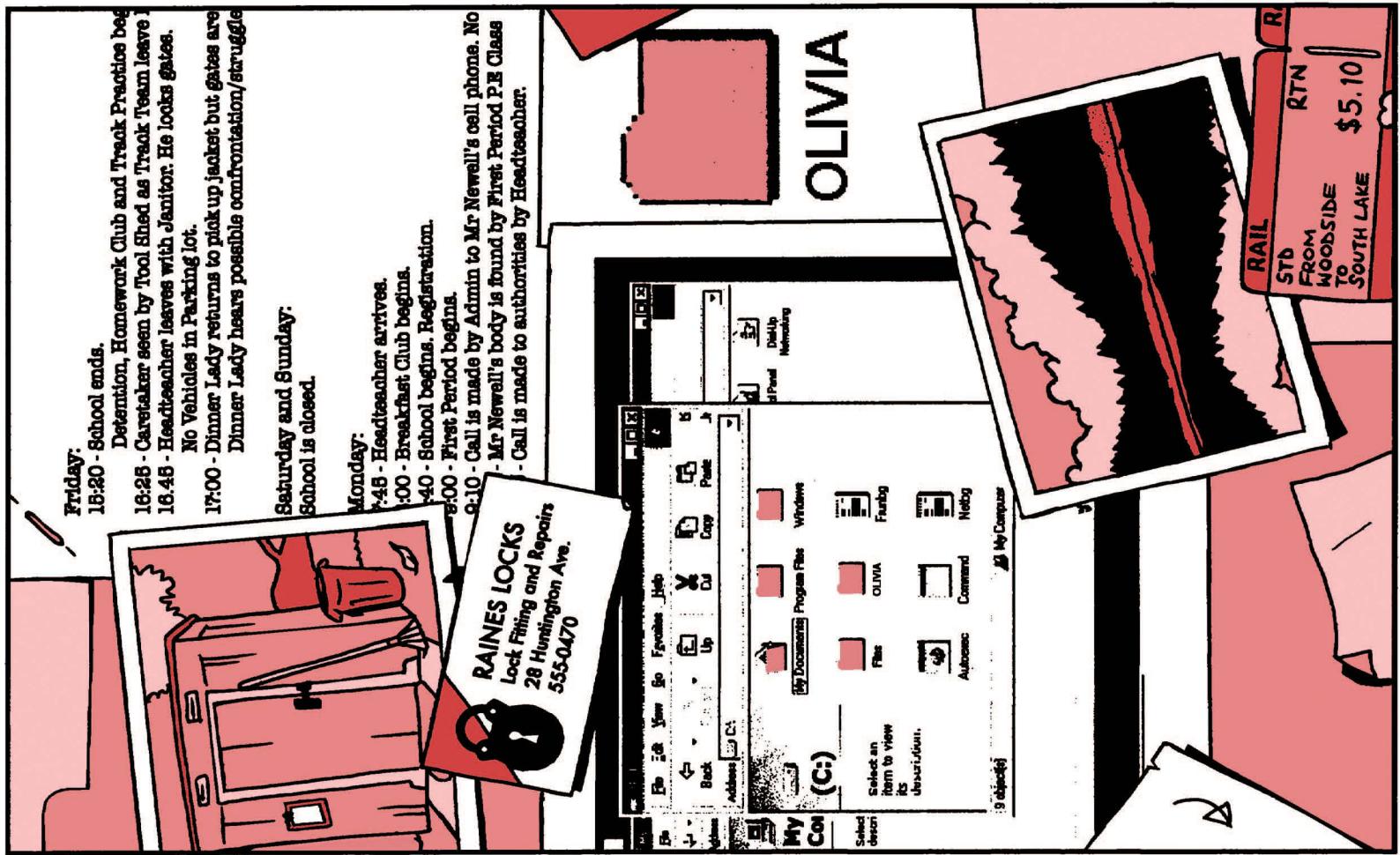
“I’m currently working on my next comic, a different genre, but each comic will form part of a series and eventually will come together in a super team-up comic. So Veronica and Megan will both feature in that team-up comic, and this crime leads them there.”

Find Cheam online at www.rsjcheam.com, and on Twitter and Instagram: @rsjcheamcomics.









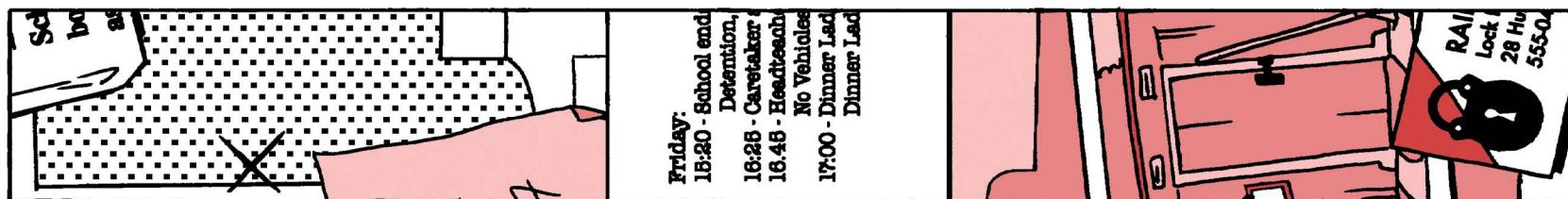


DAVID FOSTER TOOK HIS DAUGHTER, OLIVIA, TO SOUTH LAKE FOR THE WEEKEND, AND TICKET STUBS WERE FOUND. THEY LEFT ON THE SATURDAY MORNING AND RETURNED LATE SUNDAY EVENING. THE TRAIN WAS USED DUE TO ROAD WORKS ON HIGHWAY 9. ROAD WORKS WERE CONFIRMED BUT DETECTIVES FOUND THE TIMING OF THIS TRIP TO BE CURIOUS.

THE STATE'S MAIN REASONS FOR SUSPECTING DAVID:

- THE DUST SHEETS USED TO COVER THE BODY.
- THE TIMELY TRIP TO SOUTH LAKE.
- AN EMPTY FOLDER FOUND ON MR NEWELL'S LAPTOP TITLED: "OLIVIA".

THE STATE SUGGESTED THAT MR NEWELL MAY HAVE HAD INAPPROPRIATE FEELINGS FOR OLIVIA FOSTER AND WHEN DAVID FOUND OUT HE SNAPPED... OLIVIA WAS QUESTIONED BUT NO EVIDENCE OF A TEACHER / PUPIL RELATIONSHIP WAS FOUND.



THE CASE...

THE VICTIM WAS MR NEWELL, A SCIENCE TEACHER AT WOODSIDE HIGH.

MR NEWELL'S BODY WAS FOUND AT THE EDGE OF THE SCHOOL PLAYING FIELD DURING FIRST PERIOD ON MONDAY MORNING. KILLED BY A SINGLE BLOW TO THE HEAD, HIS BODY WAS WRAPPED IN DUST SHEETS FROM THE CARETAKER'S SHED.

THE CORONER RULED THAT MR NEWELL'S BODY HAD MOST LIKELY BEEN THERE SINCE FRIDAY EVENING. THIS LINED UP WITH THE TESTIMONY OF A DINNER LADY, WHO HAD RETURNED TO THE SCHOOL TO PICK UP HER JACKET AND HEARD WHAT SOUNDED LIKE A STRUGGLE ON THE FRIDAY.

THE CARETAKER, DAVID FOSTER WAS ARRESTED AND LATER CONVICTED OF THE MURDER.

THERE WERE ONLY TWO SETS OF KEYS FOR THE CARETAKER'S SHED: ONE KEPT BY THE CARETAKER (MR FOSTER) AND ONE KEPT IN THE SCHOOL'S KEY SAFE THAT WAS STILL THERE. THE LOCK WAS BROKEN BY POLICE DURING THE INVESTIGATION. DAVID FOSTER CLAIMED IT WAS ALREADY BROKEN AND WAS DUE REPAIR BUT NO EVIDENCE OF SUCH CALLOUT WAS EVER FOUND.



NEXT ISSUE



THE KAWAII ISSUE

EMILY VALENTINE PROFILES SIX PEOPLE FROM ACROSS THE UK WHO HAVE MADE KAWAII THEIR LIFE'S WORK!



THE GIRL IN TWILIGHT

A GIRL MEETS HER DOUBLE FROM A PARALLEL DIMENSION:
WHAT COULD POSSIBLY GO WRONG?



THAT TIME I GOT REINCARNATED AS A SLIME

ISEKAI ANIME GOES TONGUE IN CHEEK WITH THIS COMEDIC SKEWERING OF THE GENRE

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Uncooked Media Ltd, PO Box 6337,

Bournemouth, BH1 9EH

Telephone 01202 087627

Email mail@neomag.co.uk

Web www.uncookedmedia.com

The NEO Team

Editor Gemma Cox

Group Art Editor Claire Trent

Contributors David West, Jonathan Clements, Mark Guthrie, Laurence Green, Tom Smith, Andrew Osmond, Mitchell Lineham, Michael Dodson, Alex Jones and Mahiru Kurumizawa

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www.terratac.com

Customer Services

+44 (0)1202 087627

contact@selectps.com

Subscription Enquiries

+44 (0)1202 087627

chris@selectps.com

Advertising & Marketing

Group Commercial Manager Rob Cox
rob@uncookedmedia.com

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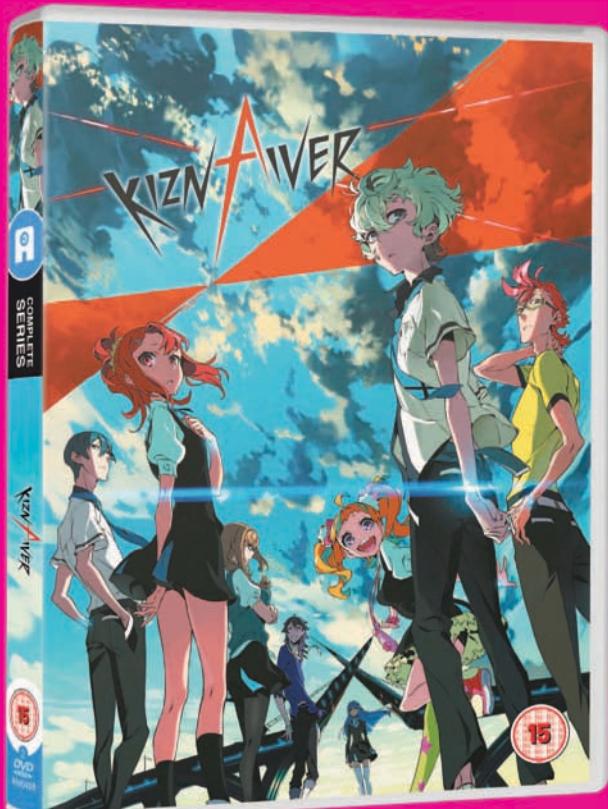
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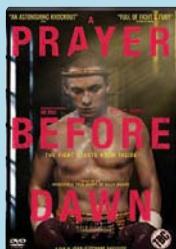
The show follows seven teenagers in Japan who are used as experimental guinea pigs and soon find they can feel each other's pain. This teen melodrama is also a thoughtful and self-aware sci-fi show, coming as it does from scriptwriter Mari Okada, who also worked on the recent *Maquia: When The Promised Flower Blooms* as writer and director.

Andrew Osmond reviewed the show last issue, giving the release 4/5 and praising it as a "hugely enjoyable tale of tormented teens", adding "As an Okada-written anime, *Kiznaiver* fits between the film *Anthem of the Heart*, with which it shares themes of emotional repression, and the series *Toradora!*, with its journey from silly comedy to exquisite anguish."

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[FILM REVIEW]

A PRAYER BEFORE DAWN

A bruising business

OUT NOW // ALTITUDE // 18 // DRAMA // £15.99 (DVD) // 117 MINS

PLOT Busted for drugs in Thailand, Billy Moore (Joe Cole) is sent to prison, where he encounters a world of corrupt guards, gangs, and chaos. Trying to quit his addiction and escape the grinding misery of the cells, he joins the prison's Muay Thai boxing team, fighting to earn some self-respect.

Jean-Stéphane Sauvaire's drama is based on the autobiography of the real Billy Moore and it's an unflinching and often harrowing experience. Moore is his own worst enemy. He's addicted to Yaba, a form of methamphetamine, and whenever he gets high he's prone to bursts of extreme violence.

There's nothing glamorous or sanitised about the way the film presents both life in a Thai prison – Moore witnesses a rape on his first night of incarceration – and the bruising sport of Muay Thai. Furthermore, since he doesn't speak Thai, Moore constantly struggles to understand what's happening. The script makes minimal use of dialogue for the protagonist, requiring an exceptionally physical performance from Cole, who has a sympathetic, handsome face that contorts into a grimace of fury and hatred when he's loaded up on Yaba.

The only source of kindness he encounters comes from Fame (Pornchanok Mabklang), a transgender prisoner who works in the dispensary, and their relationship is presented

without judgement or sentimentality. Much of the supporting cast is filled with former inmates, adorned head to foot in tattoos, although there's precious little brotherhood amongst the prison population where the weak and vulnerable are ruthlessly exploited.

Panya Yimmumphai impresses as the cell leader of Moore's unit, trying to maintain a sense of order amidst all the seething aggression of a large group of men crammed into the same living space. There are no individual cells for the prisoners, they sleep almost on top of one another in a sweltering shared room and David Ungaro's cinematography captures the claustrophobia of the cramped quarters all too well.

The Muay Thai scenes are quite unlike those found in glossy martial arts films like *Ong-Bak* or *Chocolate*. There are no super slick, fancy moves on display, just two people locked in a frantic encounter, each fighting as much on determination and aggression as technique. The direction and editing of the Muay Thai matches really captures how the rest of the world falls away during a fight, leaving only the two opponents and their struggle. Nicholas Becker's music adds to the dark mood, often filling the soundtrack with droning, ambient effects that are strangely hypnotic.

Sauvaire never takes the obvious choices in his tale of an angry young man searching for redemption, and the stark portrayal of the squalor and brutality of the prison is powerfully unsettling. Cole rises to the challenge with utter conviction in this contemporary answer to *Somebody Up There Likes Me*. ●

★★★★★

EXTRAS

The DVD includes an engaging interview with the real Billy Moore, conducted by rapper Professor Green. Moore now works to help other people dealing with addiction.

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VI



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ENTER THE FIST

Who is this heavily muscled hero who makes his opponents explode? NEO looks at the cranium-shattering bloody history behind *Fist Of The North Star*.

SOMETIME DURING THE closing years of the 20th century, the planet was engulfed in the atomic fires of a nuclear war, bringing the nightmare of the apocalypse to the people of Earth. Civilisations fell like leaves in autumn and from the shadows of the mushroom clouds rose a new, lawless way of life. Bandits and warlords inflict suffering upon the helpless, and only those with the strength to fight have any hope of survival. Into this desolate scene comes Kenshiro, the heir of the Hokuto Shinken martial arts style, the man who bears the mantle of the Fist of the North Star. He's searching the wastelands for his beloved Yuria. But a solitary man, travelling alone and unarmed, is a magnet for the murderers and maniacs who scratch out a desperate, savage existence in the atom-blasted wastelands where once there were oceans, forests and homes. Where life remains, there is conflict. And Kenshiro is no stranger to that.

INFLUENCES AND INSPIRATIONS

Fist Of The North Star was originally serialised in *Weekly Shonen Jump* magazine beginning in 1983, written by Buronson and illustrated by Tetsuo Hara. The original concept was Hara's creation and it concerned the young heir to a powerful martial arts style that involved beating opponents by striking their pressure points, but when *Weekly Shonen Jump* decided to run the series, they brought in Buronson, real name Yoshiyuki Okamura, to work with Hara. Buronson took the basic premise and gave it a post-apocalyptic twist inspired by the *Mad Max* films, and *Fist Of The North Star*

was born. The manga was swiftly adapted into an anime that debuted in 1984 and ran until 1987, whereupon it was instantly followed by a sequel.

Kenshiro's appearance draws inspiration from Mel Gibson in *Mad Max*, particularly with that sleeveless leather biker jacket, while his high-pitched battle cry, performed as he strikes his unlucky foes at lightning speed, is clearly a nod to Bruce Lee. The post-apocalyptic setting and the premise of a deadly lone warrior protecting the weak owes a great debt to Go Nagai's manga *Violence Jack*. Kenshiro's demeanour and his fighting style both suggest the influence of Sonny Chiba's character Terry Tsurugi in *The Street Fighter* films of the 1970s. Both Tsurugi and Kenshiro wear armbands, although in the case of the former they provide protection against sword attacks, while they seem more aesthetic for Kenshiro. In the 1974 movie *The Street Fighter*, Tsurugi is a master of a martial arts style that blends Japanese karate with Chinese martial arts – referred to as kenpo in Japanese, but commonly called kung fu in the west. Tsurugi's skill and power enable him to dispatch opponents in all manner of gruesome ways, including punching someone from behind to cause their eyes to come out of their head, splitting a skull with a single blow, and using a special punch that puts the victim into an instant coma. Similarly, Kenshiro's Hokuto Shinken style comes from an ancient Chinese lineage and enables him to strike an enemy's vital points with incredible speed and accuracy, disrupting the flow of blood and energy through their body, usually resulting in a gruesome and fatal eruption that rips their skull apart. He is so skilled that he can strike these



channelling points using both his hands and feet, and Kenshiro is so tough than in one episode of the anime series, he pulverises a tank with his bare hands.

THE BIG DIPPER

Despite his devastating strength, Kenshiro is not invulnerable, not undefeatable. He bears seven scars on his chest that look, at first glance, like bullet wounds that lie in the shape of the Big Dipper constellation. However, they are actually the result of damage inflicted by Kenshiro's rival Shin, who drove his fingers into Kenshiro's chest and left him for dead. Why, you may not unreasonably ask, did Shin do something so grisly? The answer is Yuria, the girl who holds Kenshiro's manly heart and whom Shin desired for himself. The heir to the Nanto Koshuken style, Shin defeated Kenshiro and claimed Yuria, providing the impetus for Kenshiro to train harder than ever in anticipation of tracking down his rival and saving Yuria from his clutches. Alas, when he finally does so, Shin tells him that Yuria is dead. Then Kenshiro hears a rumour that she has been spotted in the town of Eden, which leads to the events portrayed in *Fist Of The North Star: Lost Paradise*.

RIVAL MASTERS OF MAYHEM

While the nuclear war wiped out most of mankind, saw governments collapse, and left cities as crumbling edifices now vacant of life, it couldn't

kill kung fu. Shin and Kenshiro aren't the only martial arts masters to have survived the nuclear Armageddon. There's Raoh, the self-styled Overlord of the Apocalypse and King Of Fists who believes that might makes right and plans to use his power to rule what remains of the world. Toki is another senior student of the Hokuto Shinken, but as he is afflicted with radiation sickness, he makes no claim on the mantle of Fist of the North Star.

Jagi, the third of the four Hokuto brothers alongside Kenshiro, Raoh, and Toki, is quite, quite mad. Driven insane by jealousy after Kenshiro was named Fist of the North Star and heir to the Hokuto Shinken, Jagi carries a shotgun and wears a helmet that hides his horribly disfigured face. He bears the same scars on his chest as Kenshiro but in Jagi's case they were self-inflicted. Yep, he's bonkers. Another foe to watch out for is Thouzer, the heir of the Nanto Seiken style and a man who considers all others to be beneath him, mere insects to be trampled upon. The post-apocalyptic world is rough and just getting rougher.

The franchise has been hugely successful, spawning videogames, OVAs, the 2003 series *New Fist Of The North Star*, and even a live action movie that came out in 1995 with British martial arts actor Gary Daniels stepping into the role of Kenshiro. Unfortunately, the film is a turkey, suffering from terrible acting, limp fight scenes and cheap special effects. So best to leave that one in the dustbin of history and stick to the originals in all their demented, head-exploding madness and majesty. ●

FIST OF THE NORTH STAR LOST PARADISE

TM



As Exploding Head Syndrome sweeps through the desert town of Eden, NEO's David West talks to producer Daisuke Sato and director Jun Orihara about giving *Fist Of The North Star* a *Yakuza*-style makeover in *Lost Paradise*.



Paradise Worldwide

"We don't know yet if this was the right title to bring out in the west," says Sato about *Lost Paradise*'s global release. "However, the *Fist Of The North Star* franchise has been brought over to the west in the past in the form of anime and movies. We believe that there is a fanbase out there and would like for everyone to play Ryu Ga Gotoku Studios' latest challenge."

In a post-apocalyptic world, where hordes of savage bandits roam the dusty wastelands to prey on the weak and vulnerable, one man is on a mission to find his lost love. Kenshiro, the heir to the incredibly lethal Hokuto Shinken style of martial arts, heard a rumour that his beloved Yuria, once believed dead, has been seen in the town known as Eden. An oasis of civilisation in the midst of the barren desert, Eden is a magnet for travellers, lost souls, and warlords hungry for bloodshed and bounty. But Kenshiro will let nothing and no one stand in his way as he follows the trail that he prays will lead him to Yuria.

Fist Of The North Star: Lost Paradise is the latest game adapted from the hit manga that first burst forth into the world in a shower of blood back in 1983. "My introduction to *Fist of the North Star* was in middle school," says game producer Daisuke Sato. "The original manga was serialised in *Weekly Shonen Jump* magazine at the time. I remember being shocked the first time I read it, when a friend recommended it. I didn't miss a week after that, and I still have all the manga volumes."

Director Jun Orihara was no less enamoured on his first encounter with the notorious series. "When I turned ten years old, my friend gave me the first volume of *Fist of the North Star* for my birthday," says Orihara. "I became a fan instantly and then proceeded to collecting the rest of the manga and following the series on *Shonen Jump*. After getting married, I exchanged the full-size manga for the smaller compact pocket editions but made it a point to keep *Fist of the North Star* in my life. It's like a bible to me."

KENSHIRO JOINS THE YAKUZA

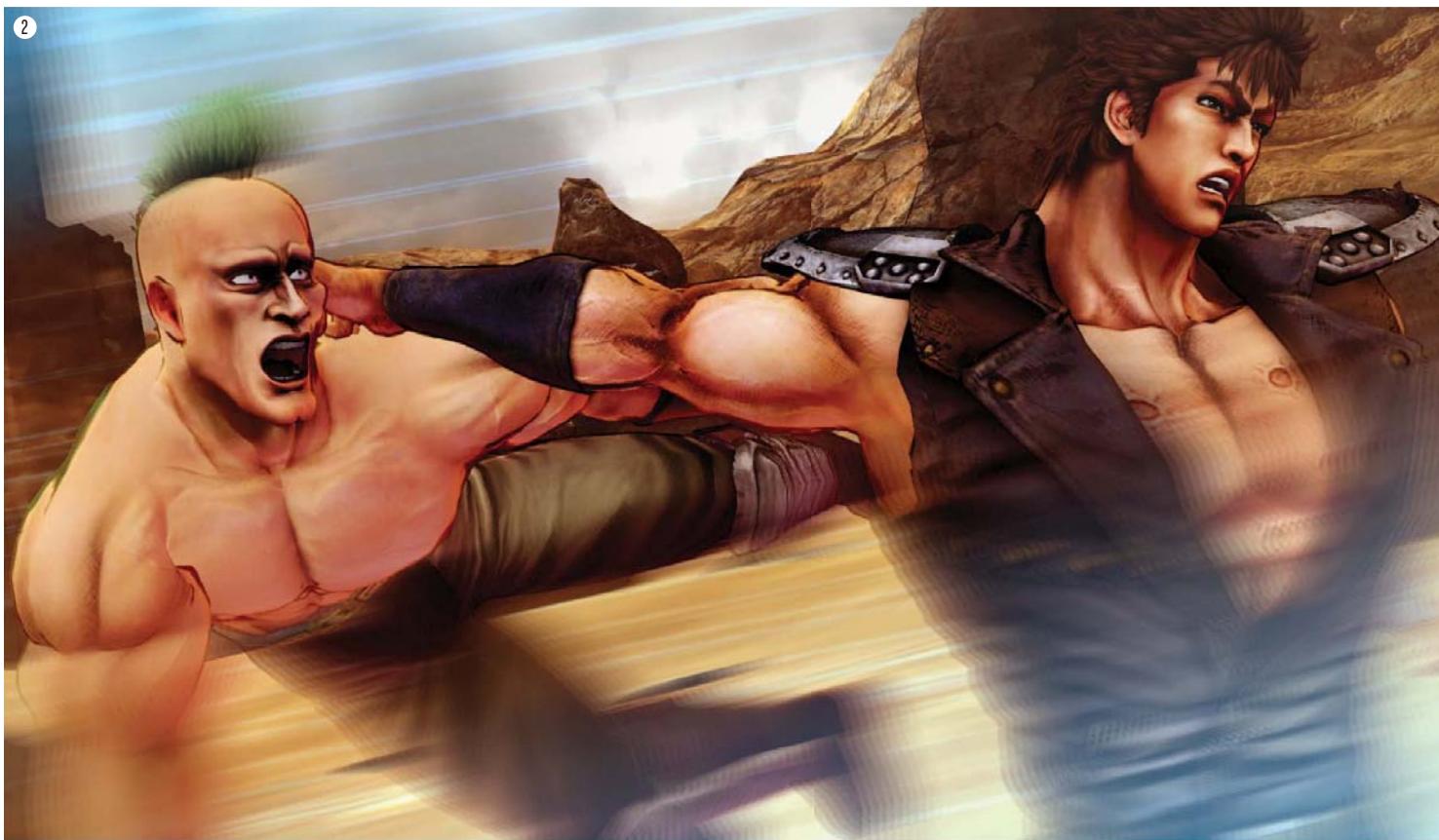
Lost Paradise is the first videogame in the history of *FOTNS* to use the format of the *Yakuza* series developed by Ryu Ga Gotoku studios. The gameplay uses a third-person perspective

as Kenshiro explores the streets and alleys of Eden, getting into fights with bandits, marauders and ne'er-do-wells, as he searches for clues to Yuria's fate. Asked why SEGA chose to go for the *Yakuza*-style model, Sato replies, "It's probably because the original concept of this project was 'What if Ryu Ga Gotoku Studios created a *Fist of the North Star* game...?' The goal was to create a *Fist of the North Star* world and Kenshiro unlike any other title, by layering on *Fist of the North Star* onto a game style that Ryu Ga Gotoku Studio excels in."

The two most recent *Yakuza* releases, *Yakuza 6: Song Of Life* and *Yakuza Kiwami 2*, both utilise Ryu Ga Gotoku's shiny new Dragon Engine to power their play, but that wasn't put to use on *Lost Paradise*. "When this project was greenlighted, it was during the development of *Yakuza 6*, which means that the Dragon Engine was unfinished at this point," says Sato. "We thought it would be extremely risky to use an incomplete engine on another title, so we decided to move forward with the engine we already had."

As Kenshiro struts his way around the streets of Eden, it's easy to be reminded of how Kiryu strides through the Kamurocho district in the *Yakuza* games. However, the open world format in *Lost Paradise* adds another dimension to the experience by allowing players to acquire a dune buggy which enables Kenshiro to venture out into the desert, where he can battle against the feral bandits and find items to bring back to Eden.

"We made it so that the area that you can explore in Eden and the wastelands would gradually expand, as expected with how the main storyline develops," says Orihara. "The timing that new features get added is also estimated by how far along you will be in the plot, so there were times you don't need to follow the main storyline right away. Especially towards the beginning of the game, the player isn't completely accustomed to the world yet, so we made sure that there wasn't any



Hokuto Shinken

Kenshiro's brutal martial arts style of Hokuto Shinken involves the high speed striking of his enemies' Channelling Points – which relate to acupuncture – thereby disrupting the flow of their blood and life force with spectacularly gruesome results. His signature move involves hitting a foe so fast they don't even realise what has happened to them until Kenshiro coolly tells them "You're already dead." Then their head explodes.



excessive content in order for the player to be able to focus on the story and the environment. We tried to time the gradual unlocking of new content around the time Kenshiro was able to freely roam around Eden. This was a gimmick to make the player empathise with the freedom that Kenshiro obtained."

BUILDING PARADISE

With a cast of muscle men clad in leather fighting in a post-apocalyptic wasteland populated by punked-up maniacs riding custom-built battle wagons and motorcycles, it's not hard to spot the influence of George Miller's *Mad Max* movies on *Lost Paradise*.

"Of course! We were greatly influenced by *Mad Max*!" says Orihara. "Fist of the North Star itself was influenced by *Mad Max*, and personally, I believe that *Fist of the North Star* fans should also be *Mad Max* fans. I'd recommend checking out both franchises, as it'd be great if you can enjoy both, and come to appreciate their differences too."

One of the biggest challenges for the team was bringing the world of FOTNS to life, particularly Eden, the City Of Miracles that has managed to thrive and survive against all the odds. Rising from the sand, Eden is protected by impenetrable walls and the grim guards, commanded by Jagre, the Captain of Eden's Watch, who strive to keep their home from being overrun by raiders. Jagre may guard the gates, but he answers to Xsana, the daughter of Nadai, the visionary who founded Eden. And within Eden itself lies Sphere City, a mysterious structure that seems to be the key to Eden's prosperity, providing it with wonders like electricity.

"There was no way to really experience 'living' in the *Fist Of The North Star* universe in the past works, and we were convinced that was going to be the defining feature in our game. So then, it was our number one priority to convey not only the story, but the lifestyle through the setting," says Orihara. "It was also important to have a perceived feeling of prosperity, almost to the point of it being a 'miracle'. Sphere City is the >>>

1. The Hakuto Hundred-Fist Rush – for when one punch just won't get the job done. 2. The mosh pits in Eden were particularly rough this year. 3. The Hokuto Bone Crusher Strike: side effects may include your skeleton exploding out of your body. And dry mouth.



>>> symbol of prosperity in Eden, but the actual streets of Eden show the scar of the city that was once destroyed and restored. We researched the manga backgrounds and worked with NSP [North Star Pictures, owners of the FOTNS licence] to make sure we accurately portrayed what the buildings and cityscape looked like before they were destroyed.

“Within the development team, we have a mutual understanding of a certain wall texture we call the ‘North Star Wall’. This wall surface captures a texture distinctive to *Fist Of The North Star*. We hope that you all can experience this ‘North Star Wall’ as well.”

Back in 1983, it was writer Buronson – aka Yoshiyuki Okamura – and artist Tetsuo Hara who brought *Fist Of The North Star* to life in the pages of *Weekly Shonen Jump*. So the team behind *Lost Paradise* naturally wanted to see what they thought of their game.

“The main thing that we got feedback on from Tetsuo Hara was the characters,” says Sato. “Furthermore, the new original characters in this game were drawn by Mr. Hara and we

rendered them in 3D. We also made sure to get Mr. Hara’s seal of approval on the voice actors, since he has his input as the creator of these characters. Other content like the original story and game features have undergone review with the licensor, North Star Pictures.”

“Besides the characters, we’ve received some feedback regarding the backgrounds,” adds Orihara. “Mr. Hara especially had strong feelings for the nightclub and requested it to be revised to be ‘New York-like, but in an Indian flair’ which was difficult to achieve. Our response to his request can be seen in the in-game nightclub, so we hope that you take a close look at it.”

PUTTING THE FUN IN THE FIST

The classic *Fist Of The North Star* manga was a very macho affair with Kenshiro being a fine example of the sort of stoical, single-minded hero found in series like *Lone Wolf And Cub*. It wasn’t exactly a bundle of gags, but in keeping with the spirit of the *Yakuza* franchise, a sense of silliness has snuck into *Lost Paradise*. Mini-games and side quests are a vital part of the *Yakuza* experience and in *Lost Paradise* players can explore hitherto unseen aspects of Kenshiro as he tries his hand at being a bartender, making cocktails with the power of the Hokuto Shinken while listening to the customers’ tales of woe.

For those with an insatiable appetite for action, Kenshiro can try post-apocalyptic baseball practice, which involves using a metal girder to whack bandits riding on motorcycles as though they were fastball pitches. If you prefer your action more up close and personal, Kenshiro can enter the



"THE ONLY RAY OF HOPE FOR ME WAS THAT THIS GAME WAS AN ACTION GAME... I PROBABLY WOULD'VE LOST ALL HOPE IF THIS GAME WAS A SIMULATION GAME." DIRECTOR JUN ORIHARA

Colosseum where he can engage in a one-on-one duel or a Battle Royale where the winner is the last man standing in a free-for-all brawl. If you're feeling less inclined towards bone breaking, Kenshiro can use his knowledge of anatomy to work as a doctor in his own clinic, diagnosing illnesses and administering treatments. Alternatively, he can don a tuxedo instead of doctor's scrubs and become a nightclub manager, hustling for big spenders in Eden's gambling den.

"The concept of this title was to come up with a truly original game while being a collaboration presented by Ryu Ga Gotoku studios," says Sato about the mini-games. "Because it was a collaboration with the *Yakuza* series, it was very important to include the humorous features in there. While we did expect some negative reactions, because we created it as a 'collaborative title', it was a necessity."

In addition to light-hearted games within the game, *Lost Paradise* imports another tradition from the *Yakuza* series. As Kenshiro traverses the desert in his buggy, he may stumble upon old videogame cabinets which he can bring back to Eden's own arcade, where they are fully playable.

"You can play these games in the arcade: *Space Harrier*, *Super Hang On*, *OutRun*, *UFO Catcher*, and *Fist of the North*

Star MK III version," says Orihara. "The reason why we included these games has to do with the overall worldly aspect of the game. We wanted to set it up so that the games convey the 'old world' (the world before the nuclear war) to really emphasise that this world really lost everything. For example, even creating rubber material in this world is a struggle. I thought that the concept of 'playing' was probably one of the things that were lost too, especially hi-tech things. From there, I imagined that arcades probably existed at one point (maybe because we are SEGA) and that led to including this feature in the game."

MIND BLOWING ACTION

Lost Paradise just wouldn't be a *Fist Of The North Star* game if it couldn't capture the explosive and bloody action of the series when Kenshiro unleashes the deadly power of the Hokuto Shinken. As in the *Yakuza* games, landing combos on enemies powers up the hero, enabling him to perform special finishing moves which, of course, includes Kenshiro's most infamous technique of making his opponent's head explode.

"To preface things, it definitely requires a certain type of courage to bring the concept of 'A human exploding >>>'

4. After a long, hard day slaughtering barbarians in the post-apocalyptic wasteland, unwind with a cocktail. 5. Mohawks were the must-have hairstyle for the fashion forward bandit this season. 6. The poor man's mind was ready to burst after Kenshiro told him, "Your stomach thinks all potatoes are mashed."

Fans For Life

"The players of this game are predominantly male and tend to be much older," says Sato when asked about the Japanese fanbase for *Lost Paradise*. "A huge percentage of these players are those who were fans of the *Fist Of The North Star* anime or manga during its original release."



“...IT DEFINITELY REQUIRES A CERTAIN TYPE OF COURAGE TO BRING THE CONCEPT OF ‘A HUMAN EXPLODING AFTER BEING STABBED WITH ONE’S BARE HANDS’ TO EVERYDAY LIFE.” DIRECTOR JUN ORIHARA

>>> after being stabbed with one’s bare hands’ to everyday life. This topic is only allowed in the context of *Fist Of The North Star*,” says Orihara. “We implemented this unprecedented level of unique violence into a game, so we believe people understand that this experience is not ordinary.”

In the manga and anime, Kenshiro is incredibly strong, so the game developers had to figure out how to make the fights in *Lost Paradise* feel true to the core concept without making the hero invincible.

“It was definitely a struggle,” says Orihara. “We wanted to give everyone a chance to feel what it’s like to be Kenshiro, but also allow users to have the sense of accomplishment in the game. Trying to balance these

two elements ended up being a bigger challenge than with the *Yakuza* series. The only ray of hope for me was that this game was an action game. This is because even if Kenshiro gets beat down by a weak enemy, people will understand that it’s not the matter of Kenshiro’s strength, but more so the player’s ability. I probably would’ve lost all hope if this game was a simulation game.”

Never give up hope and fight to reunite Kenshiro with his missing sweetheart – *Fist Of The North Star: Lost Paradise* is out now on the PlayStation 4 from SEGA. It’s time to get ready to start exploding a few heads around here! ●



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